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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

# THE EMPRESS THEATRE IN FORT MACLEOD, ALBERTA

BY ©

MARSELLE I. JOBS THOMPSON

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA

EDMONTON, ALBERTA
SPRING 1990

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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# Abstract

Since 1912, the Empress Theatre has stood as the focal point for live theatrical entertainment, both amateur and professional, within the community of Fort Macleod. With a history of theatrical activity dating back to 1874, the community of Fort Macleod demonstrated a need for a permanent and suitable theatre that could accommodate both film and live production. The very fact that the Empress has effectively served the needs of the community has contributed to its longevity and to its recent restoration.

Although the Empress Theatre was designed as a combination motion picture and opera house, it enjoyed its most active period as a venue for live theatrical entertainment from 1912 to 1937. During this period, travelling road shows, vaudeville, opera companies, minstrel shows, hypnotists, magicians, concert orchestras, animal acts, dance revues, and children's theatrical companies performed on the Empress stage. The Empress Theatre also featured regular dramatic performances, concerts, and recitals by a wide variety of local community groups ranging from the Macleod Dramatic Society to the Anglican Young People's Society to the Macleod Board of Trade. In fact, a study of the Empress Theatre and the activity surrounding it reveals the larger picture of the history of theatre in Fort Macleod. As well, an analysis of the early history of the Empress also provides a microcosmic view of the history of theatrical activity on the Prairies, as the Empress

represents a rather typical theatre in a western Canadian town. The Empress Theatre stands today as one of the last vestiges of a significant era in western Canada's theatre history.

The Empress was built as a first-class theatre. In 1982, the Empress Theatre was designated as a provincial historic resource, and by May 1, 1987, the Fort Macleod Historic Area Society Board had purchased the Empress with the intention to restore and renovate the theatre in order to utilize it as a community performing arts centre. The restoration project was officially completed on June 29, 1989. Much of the charm surrounding the Empress Theatre is associated with the preserved historical features such as the neon tulip lights and pressed metal ceiling, the staggered double seats, the balcony, the glass ticket booth and the hardwood floors. Remnants of the touring years grace the walls of the dressing rooms in the form of signatures of performers from the past.

Today the Empress serves such community groups as the Fort Macleod and District Allied Arts Council, the Willow Creek Folk Club, the Fort Players, and the Great West Theatre Company. The Empress Theatre is not only well preserved, but it continues to serve the community in a manner very similar to how it served the community from 1912 to 1938.

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# Chapter One

## Historical Background

Thirty-eight years before prominent Fort Macleod[1] lawyer Thomas B. Martin undertook a new business venture by building the Empress Theatre in 1912, one hundred and fifty exhausted North West Mounted Police established Fort Macleod as the far-western post of civic authority on Canada's prairies. Under the command of Assistant Commissioner James F. Macleod and guidance of Metis Jerry Potts, the bedraggled company of redcoats arrived on the banks of the Oldman River[2] and began laying the foundations for law and order in the great North West. R. B. Nevitt, Assistant Surgeon for the company, recorded the event in letters sent home to his sweetheart in Eastern Canada. On October 14, 1874, he writes:

> We have come to our journey's end at last, a beautiful place in the valley of the rivers. We have already begun building, but probably it will be five or six weeks before we get into our winter quarters.[3]

Thus began the first winter at Fort Macleod, a winter marked by tests of endurance, deprivation and a pervading sense of isolation. Disappointed by the lack of excitement in police duties, fearful of the coming winter and the unknown surroundings, the men were constantly battling the elements. Captain Cecil Denny, of the original Macleod expedition, described the winter of 1874 as the "hardest winter" in the history of the N.W.M.P.:

> About the fort, too, there was constant activity; timber to be felled, hauled out and cut up, buffalo hunted for meat, buildings to be repaired. The sod-covered roofs collapsed, the earthen floors were cold and damp--these combined miseries were enough to sap the morale of any body of men, and no praise can be too high for those who endured them during that long and trying winter of 1874 at Macleod.[4]

Long and trying as the winter was, the Mounties made the best of a bleak situation by attempting to bring "civilization" to their mean surroundings. In an effort to combat the daily monotony of winter existence on the prairie, the young constables of Fort Macleod took up forms of entertainment which they had enjoyed in their Eastern Canadian homes. Undaunted by the absence of females, or at least white females, night life in the barracks consisted of such unlikely activity as dances. In The Law Marches West, Sir Cecil Denny recalls the dance on the occasion of the first Christmas at Fort Macleod, 1874:

> At a grand dinner prepared by our chef and attended by all, buffalo hump was served in place of roast beef, but we had real plum pudding. A dance followed, our partners half-breed girls. With the exception of the McDougall family at Morley, there were no white women in southern Alberta at that time.[5]

Dances were very popular with the barracks bound men and were also enjoyed by the local population. It must have been quite a treat to have had female dance partners, since the first N.W.M.P. wives did not arrive for about two years and marriage was generally discouraged for the early Mounties. R.B. Nevitt vividly describes the evening's entertainment on January 5, 1875:

> In the evening after dinner we had a big dance in the mess room. One of our mess men plays on the concertina and sleeps in the kitchen. We wakened him up and made him play for us. We began with a "walk round" then had a set of quadrilles and then varied the proceedings with waltzes and gallops and schottisches. We had very good fun.
>
> If I may be allowed, without being called conceited, I will say that I was the Belle of the Ball. I was the only one who could dance (Lady) with anything like decency, and consequently my hand was sought after.[6]

Dances, however, were not the only form of entertainment devised by these early defenders of the law. Card games helped pass the long hours and singing songs reminded them of the family, friends and "civilization" that they had left behind in their Eastern homes.

Theatrical entertainment also took its place early in the history of Fort Macleod. With very few resources at hand within the barren confines of the log-and-mud fort, dramatic activity seemed to be an ideal way for these men to entertain themselves. Whether instigated spontaneously or previously planned, live performances of one sort or another often filled the evenings. On February 19, 1875, Nevitt writes:

> In the evening after dinner, cribbage, casino and, to vary the course of the evening, mimic after-dinner speeches were made; everything in the room was presented to everyone and each had to make a reply. It caused some amusement.[7]

Impromptu "theatricals" soon made way for actual concerts complete with popular acts of the day. Nevitt's letter of

March 18, 1875, notes the efforts and ingenuity of the men as they entertained each other and some of the local population.

> Last night about 7:30 the concert began. Some of the songs were very good and appropriate; others were very amusing. Beatty (the man who deserves the leather medal) was dressed as a darkey and burnt corked. His appearance so frightened Mrs. Glen, the half-breed wife of John Glen, that she rushed shrieking from the room.[8]

Like the frequent chinooks which brought a welcome respite from the sub-zero temperatures of winter, an evening's entertainment with occasional dramatics also served to break the monotony of the rather severe lifestyle. It was a welcome change from the never-ending tasks of that first winter, a winter with many desertions and little incentive to remain faithful to the N.W.M.P. In Fort Macleod--Our Colourful Past, Donna Coulter describes some of the hardships endured by the early Fort Macleod Mounties:

> The work was hard and usually lacked adventure. The pay was poor and seldom on time. The men could charge their needs at the local store, but with interest rates as high as 24 per cent, the recruits became hostile. At one point, Colonel Macleod wired his superiors that the men were near mutiny. Only then was he allowed to withdraw their back pay from a Helena bank.[9]

Once spring arrived, the attention of the troop was directed more toward the outdoors, and sports became a main avenue of entertainment.

> Today opened clear calm and bright. Just the kind of day for a cricket match and exactly what one would wish the Queen's birthday to be. By ten o'clock the wickets were pitched.
>
> ...A baseball match was then inaugurated and I was solicited to play. We played against nine "citizens" and beat them badly. ...A pony race was gotten up and

> run but it was only for a short distance and only two ponies entered and did not create much excitement.[10]

Even in these first days at Fort Macleod, amusement was varied and sophisticated. From dances to dramatics to cricket matches, entertainment was employed with a sense of organization and resourcefulness. R.B. Nevitt even documented the early years at the fort in paintings and sketches. He did this as a personal diversion, but the artwork later became an important historical record for future generations. The environment and circumstances were conducive to the development and establishment of these divertissements as the settling of the West began.

By 1876, the wives of N.W.M.P. officers began to arrive at Fort Macleod. Although generally discouraged, marriages still took place and wives (or prospective wives) made the long trek westward, surviving hardships which N.W.M.P. policymakers had deemed too difficult for the women. By 1877, even Colonel Macleod's wife had arrived in Fort Macleod.

> The Commissioner, Colonel Macleod, had brought up Mrs. Macleod and Inspector Winder and Sub-Inspector Shurtliff had also been joined by their wives, so that there were now three ladies in barracks. Sub-Constable Gallagher had left the force and started to farm nearby. His wife had also come up. These ladies all came by way of the Missouri River to Fort Benton, and then made the long journey across the plains to Macleod. It was quite an undertaking for women unused to the hardships of the West, and proof of great courage on their part.[11]

Although Mary Macleod had been born and raised in Lower Fort Garry and was somewhat used to frontier living, her honeymoon journey to Fort Macleod was an extreme test of endurance. Since the Battle of the Little Big Horn had taken place the previous summer, the long trek was made through territory which was potentially very dangerous. Mary Macleod, however, endured even the most harsh conditions on her way to Fort Macleod:

> Five months later she (Mary) met James in Chicago to make the long and arduous journey by train, stage, bobsled and dog team to the First Territorial Council at Swan River, then back to Winnipeg and again for an official visit to Ottawa. When they did go to Fort Macleod it was by a Missouri River boat to Fort Benton, then by police wagon or horseback the rest of the way.[12]

Far from burdening their law-enforcing husbands, these pioneer women brought a measure of comfort and reminders of home to the male-dominated community. They shared the load of chores and duties and were models of dedication and service.

Although there is very little documentation of the first non-native females in the West, there is evidence that the N.W.M.P. wives tried very hard to make life more pleasant at Fort Macleod. From the time they arrived at Fort Macleod in 1876, the quality of life improved for both married and single men alike. Social gatherings became much more interesting with both men and women in attendance. As Joy Duncan writes in Red Serge Wives:

A celebration of any sort, if restricted to one sex,

> somehow lacks the spice of a heterosexual gathering. The men of the Force had, long before, found this out and there can be little doubt that their sports days and stag dances were a poor substitute for recreation spent in the company of even one comely female. And so, after the hardships endured by the earliest men in the Forces, we can only rejoice to think that the coming of the women into their lives brought them some measure of comfort and contentment.[13]

Using their own ingenuity, these pioneer women devised means to develop and cultivate social activity in Fort Macleod to levels far beyond the simple dances and games of the early years at the detachment. Activity became organized into clubs, societies and organizations which lent credibility and prestige to the popular amusements of the day. As early as 1876, there was a formal establishment of drama at Fort Macleod. "Mrs. Macleod, with other wives, was the driving force behind all forms of entertainment. Dance clubs and drama clubs were formed and concerts organized."[14] With the establishment of clubs, the Mounties began to expand the entertainment on a typical evening to include the townspeople surrounding the fort. By 1882, The Macleod Gazette mentions theatrical entertainment provided by "C" Troop:

> The entertainment given by the Fort Macleod Minstrels came off in "C" Troop barrack-room on Thursday evening, and was a most pronounced success. Messrs. Smythe, Wiley and Halliday were repeatedly and deservedly encored. Dan Boyd was all there with the bones and in the negro sketches.[15]

The "C" Troop appears to have been the most active in producing theatricals during the winter of 1882-83. The group established itself as a dramatic club in order to raise funds for improving the recreation room in the fort. This seems to be the first time that a dramatic club is actually formed in Fort Macleod. The editor of The Gazette must have been duly impressed with the December 1882 production, as for the first time in the history of the newspaper he devoted some significant space to a review:

> An entertainment was given on Wednesday evening last, at the Fort, by "C" Troop Dramatic Club, which proved to be the best and most amusing thing of the kind yet held, and those not present to witness it certainly missed a treat.
>
> ...in fact, the whole affair was a success, and we trust soon to witness another performance, and that the public will show their appreciation of the efforts of the club by their presence.[16]

It seems the N.W.M.P. provided laughter, as well as law and order, for the Western frontier.

> The Northwest Mounted Police Dramatic Club entertained police and townfolk in 1883 with a "Laughable farce called Sarah's Young Man." The performers were Sgt. Howe and Corporals Webster, Glendenning, Shea, Scott and Carroll. A Grand Burlesque Circus concluded the evening's entertainment at the barracks.[17]

This production was also reviewed very favorably by The Gazette. From this point on, The Gazette consistently carried brief announcements, advertisements, and reviews of theatricals and concerts. Included in these announcements are notices of two more dramatic clubs in Fort Macleod. On January 26, 1886, The Gazette notes:

> The formation of a dramatic and musical club among the members of the Episcopal church is talked of. An effort will be made to get it into full working order as soon as possible. The present intention is to give

> several entertainments during the winter, after the town hall is finished.[18]

Another reference is made on February 9 of the same year: "A dramatic club is being formed in the barracks. It is probable that a performance will be given on the completion of the town hall.[19] These clubs may or may not have actually come into existence; however, it is obvious that residents of Fort Macleod were interested in the dramatic arts by their desire to form clubs of such nature.

By 1888, then, the inhabitants of Fort Macleod had progressed from the improvisational antics of early barracks night life, to the formal establishment of at least two dramatic groups: The Northwest Mounted Police Dramatic Club, and the Macleod Dramatic Company. The Macleod Dramatic Company began including N.W.M.P. wives in their productions by at least 1888. Joy Duncan quotes Dr. W.J. Cousins in Red Serge Wives:

> In April, 1888, Supt. Wood of Macleod married a young woman from the east. Almost as soon as she arrived, Mrs. Wood became active in the local drama group. At this time, the only "large" centres of population were Macleod, Pincher Creek and Lethbridge. Both Macleod and Lethbridge had barracks by this time so that dramas could be presented in the mess hall. In April of '88, it was announced that the Macleod Dramatic Company was presenting two dramas-- "The Silent Protector" and "Betsy Baker". Mrs. P.R. Neale, wife of Supt. Neale, and Mrs. Wood played the feminine leads.[20]

These new arrivals from the East were anxious to become involved in social activity as soon as possible. Perhaps concerts, tea at sports matches, and evenings of drama reminded them of their former homes and the lives they left behind. Much effort was put into these early productions in order to make them as elaborate as possible. The Macleod Dramatic Club was also responsible for the improvements of the performing space in the town hall, built in 1886. This review of a performance in April 1888 describes some of the efforts of the Macleod Dramatic Club:

> The stage in the town hall was an entirely new one, put up at considerable expense by the Dramatic Club. ...The proscenium was built up in a substantial manner, and covered with a rich gold paper of handsome design, relieved by pretty bordering. But pretty as was the outward appearance of the stage, the scene when the curtain rose was far more so, and called for the applause of the large audience. The scene for the first play was laid in a garden, and a remarkably pretty representation of it was put on.[21]

Indeed, the N.W.M.P. and their wives made a strong impact on the establishment of cultural and social activity in Fort Macleod. At the same time, however, desirable resources in the area of Fort Macleod began to attract a significant population of ranchers who were interested in the booming beef industry.

> Even before the railway, and not long after the arrival of the Mounted Police, it was apparent that much of the land was peculiarly suited to the ranching industry that was bringing such impressive profits south of the international boundary to, among others, investors from the United Kingdom....Capital from the United Kingdom and from central Canada, and even from the Maritimes, brought settlers from the same areas, attracted not only by the prospect of profitable investment but by the romance of life on the open range.[22]

This influx of ranchers from the United Kingdom and central Canada brought with it an established set of social customs and behaviour firmly grounded on wealth and social status. The formation of many clubs and leagues can be credited to these early ranchers' taste for life's finer things. With reference to the cultural activities of early ranchers in Southern Alberta, Gerald Friesen writes:

> Ranch owners and professional ranch managers visited each other at the Grande Ball, the fox hunt, and meetings of the polo league, served brilliant dinners catered by their Chinese cooks, and, when financially possible, sent their children to Victoria, Montreal, or England for schooling. Their development in the 1880s was contemporaneous with the rise of the American cattle frontier but was emphatically not Yankee in origin or style.[23]

This was an influential and elite group which sought to firmly establish itself in the West through custom and tradition. For these ranchers from the United Kingdom there was the promise of thousands of acres of land to be had at little expense, law and order established by the N.W.M.P., and support from the federal government for the cattle industry in particular. Consequently, Fort Macleod was influenced by the traditions of the primarily British ranching community surrounding it.

> With their ranch homes decorated like English country houses, formal hunts with their etiquette straight from England, polo playing, and formal dress for dinner, British cattlemen preserved the amenities. Bringing to their area a welcome atmosphere of gracious living....[24]

This atmosphere of gracious living extended into the areas of cultural and recreational activity as well. Early Fort Macleod organizations included the Macleod Cricket Club, the Macleod polo team, the Macleod Turf Association, the Macleod Golf Club, and the Macleod Tennis Club. In addition to these groups were the more usual sports of hockey, football, baseball, broomball, and curling. Outside the realm of sport, other clubs included the Macleod Quintette Club, which serenaded the town with musical selections; the Young People's Literary Society and the Althanaeum [sic] Club, both debating clubs; the Fortnightly Club, a women's group studying art, literature, music, geography and politics; and the Macleod Club, South Alberta Club and Young Men's Club, which were complete with rooms for reading, writing, and amusements. Fort Macleod also had a brass band, several women's institutes, and an abundance of fraternal organizations.

Most of these clubs and organizations had been formed between 1883 and 1900, during a period of growth greatly influenced by the development of ranching. G. Rider Davis, Q.C., Mayor of Fort Macleod from 1939 to 1956, describes this period of rapid development:

> In 1885 the second phase of the development of Fort Macleod was well on its way, with the increasing interest in ranching. Although many ~~of~~ the luxuries, even the necessities, of the present day were undreamed of then, the social life of the last 15 or 20 years of the 19th Century had the dignity and leisure that were typical of the Victorian Age. The accounts of the races, polo matches and balls in old Fort Macleod have all the fascination of a fairy tale.[25]

The ranching community, with its strong British tradition, cultivated many social and cultural institutions in Fort Macleod. Dramatic clubs in Fort Macleod appear to have been well supported by an educated group of people, with diverse and informed interest in many social activities.

In 1892, Fort Macleod became incorporated and consequently dropped the "Fort" from its name in an effort to display some measure of sophistication. "It was said by some that 'Fort' had an unrefined connotation and conjured up an image of an uncivilized, rowdy Western settlement."[26] By the turn of the century, urban growth was beginning to gain momentum as Fort Macleod entered a boom period. There was a great spirit of optimism in this southern Alberta town, which was strengthened by population growth and economic development. As settlers moved west, farming replaced ranching as the economic mainstay of the region. Many of the huge ranches were divided into smaller parcels of land which were seeded into wheat. Fort Macleod became a bustling town of trade and commerce during this period of economic prosperity.

> There is a period here that might be referred to as "the middle years." This, of course, was during the boom days that were prevalent in the west, where every town was a potential Montreal or Toronto and fortunes in real estate were made and lost. And Macleod was no exception. Hopes ran high, prospects never looked brighter and no expense was spared in advertising the advantages of Macleod in all parts of Canada.[27]

This prevalent spirit of optimism in Fort Macleod was heightened by the prospect of significant railway development in Southern Alberta with Fort Macleod serving as a major rail centre. By 1892, Fort Macleod had been connected to Calgary by a branch line of the Canadian Pacific Railway. In 1897, Fort Macleod received word that the CPR was planning the Crowsnest Pass line with a station in Fort Macleod. The station was established at Haneyville, just outside the town limits of Fort Macleod.[28] After a period of relative stability, in 1910 the CPR brought great expectations to the people of the town by announcing its plans to extend the Crowsnest Pass line to Vancouver within two years. With this announcement came the prediction that even more rail lines would intersect in Fort Macleod.

> In addition, other rail lines were expected to be built through Macleod, including ones proposed by the Canadian Northern Railway, the Grand Trunk Pacific, the Great Northern Railway, and an electric railway proposed by the Alberta Transportation Company. Expectation was that Macleod would soon become a major rail centre, and economic growth reflected this belief.[29]

Even though the expectations of Fort Macleod becoming a major railway hub were subsequently not realized, the town still enjoyed a period of prosperity between 1909 and 1914. This is reflected in the papers of the day such as The Buzzer, which in 1911 made such comments as: "Old Fort Macleod is no longer Old Fort Macleod. Macleod is coming to her own. ...Macleod is becoming more metropolitan all the time."[30] Another optimistic comment from The Buzzer in 1911 states: "We want at least five thousand people to locate and build in Macleod in the next couple years."[31] In order to encourage this growth, the Macleod Board of Trade published a pamphlet which promoted the town and its enormous potential. The Macleod Advertiser, whose express purpose was to advertise Fort Macleod, produced an article in 1911 called, "Macleod--The Town of Manifest Destiny" in which these inspiring words appeared:

> Macleod is a town of fine business blocks, wide and handsome streets, adequate churches and schools, and well-built modern residences. Its business men are progressive and enterprising and there is a spirit of civic progress about the place which is inspiring.
>
> ...Why not come to Macleod, settle down, grow up with the greatest little town (soon to be a city) in all Canada, make your fortune and be happy?[32]

It was during this period of economic prosperity that a great many buildings were erected in Fort Macleod, including the Empress Theatre.

The development of theatre in Fort Macleod, up to the building of the Empress in 1912, was not something particular to that town. Other towns in western Canada which were experiencing similar economic growth were also experiencing development in the area of the arts, and in particular, theatre. With reference to Alberta in particular, Lewis G. Thomas writes:

> The arts were not neglected, though largely the preserves of the amateur. The popularity of amateur theatricals made "putting on a play" a useful means of raising money for good causes, and concerts serving the same purpose could draw on a considerable reserve of musical talent. Before the boom collapsed in the prewar recession of 1913 many small centres had "opera houses," halls that served a multitude of social purposes. Calgary, Edmonton, and even Lethbridge had well-equipped theatres, "The Grand," "The Empire" and "The Majestic"....[33]

The development of theatre in the prairie towns of western Canada followed a similar pattern. If the settlement originated as a N.W.M.P. outpost, the first dramatic entertainment generally occurred in the barracks. Alternately, if the settlement was something other than a N.W.M.P. fort, local amateurs were the first to "put on plays" in the region, often forming dramatic clubs or societies. Regardless of the nature of the settlement, early theatre on the prairies was basically in the hands of amateurs.

In her article entitled, "Grease Paint on the Prairies", Irene Craig traces the origins of Winnipeg theatre back to amateur groups.

"The earliest record we have of grease paint on the Canadian Prairies is that of an Amateur Dramatic Society in the [18]60's. This Society was formed by a group of enthusiastic young men in the Red River Settlement."[34]
By 1879, Craig goes on to write, men from the Ontario Rifles who were stationed in Fort Garry formed the Ontario Musical and Dramatic Association. This troupe performed in the Theatre Royal, which was not a legitimate theatre building, but rather a room in the back of a local store which was used for live theatrical entertainment. Later amateur groups included the Manitoba Variety Club, the Provisional Battalion Band, the Garrison Theatre troupe, and the Winnipeg Amateur Literary and Dramatic Association.[35]

Various theatre spaces were used during this amateur period; however, with the dawning of the professional theatre and the turn of the century, several new theatres were built in Winnipeg, including the Dominion Theatre, the Walker Theatre, the Orpheum and the Pantages.[36]

Theatre in Regina and Saskatoon also developed along similar lines. "The first Regina amateurs were members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. They presented several dramatic and musical shows there in the 1880s."[37] Amateur dramatic groups as well as professional touring companies performed in both of these towns; however, neither settlement built significant theatres until the first part of the twentieth century. By 1910 the Capitol Theatre was built in Regina. Shortly thereafter the Empire Theatre was built in Saskatoon and by 1912 was featuring such acts as Tom Marks' company.[38]

Calgary and Fort Macleod almost simultaneously established dramatic clubs with similar repertories.

> The first theatre group in town, the Calgary Amateur Music and Dramatic Club, was established in 1884, when there were fewer than a thousand inhabitants in the area. ...Plenty of music and song supplemented popular material, such as short farces, burlesques, and comic recitations.[39]

However, Calgary was far ahead of Fort Macleod and all other prairie towns when it built the Hull's Opera House in 1893. This thousand-seat theatre featured road shows and concerts that were touring the West, as well as amateur groups such as the Calgary Operatic Society. In 1912, the same year as the Empress opened, the Grand Theatre was built in Calgary. The Grand could seat fifteen hundred people and represented some of the finest facilities in the West. The people of Calgary were also served by such theatres as the Empire, the Lyric, the Monarch, the Royal, and the Princess, all mainly featuring a repertoire of vaudeville.[40]

North of Calgary and Fort Macleod, Edmonton was also experiencing a parallel kind of growth in theatrical entertainment and the buildings that housed it. The people of Edmonton experienced the same stages of development, from amateur groups playing in halls to professional touring groups playing in theatres built expressly for that purpose. Like Fort Macleod, Edmonton had its share of amateur entertainment including minstrel shows, grand balls, musical concerts, and plays. Edmonton also accommodated touring companies in halls and upper rooms until Robertson Hall, Edmonton's first opera house, was built in 1882. This was just four years before Fort Macleod built its Town Hall, which served as its first opera house space. Soon Edmonton would begin erecting more permanent theatres. In the preface to Fallen Empires: Lost Theatres of Edmonton 1881-1914, John Orrell writes:

> Next came a period of fierce activity beginning in 1906 when many small theatres were erected, mostly for vaudeville though some for stock drama, and strong competition between them ensured that almost as many closed as opened. Finally there was a more stable period, lasting from about 1910 to 1914, when a

> managerial establishment was formed and the city came to have its regular stock theatre at the Lyceum, its regular road shows at the Empire and by 1913 its regular vaudeville at the Pantages.[41]

South Edmonton, or Strathcona, also has a history of live entertainment originally being performed in halls. The Princess Theatre, which opened in 1915, had a marked similarity to the Empress because it was originally designed to be used for both cinema and vaudeville. It was during this period of stability in Edmonton's theatre history that Fort Macleod was enjoying its most prosperous economic period which led to the construction of the Empress Theatre.

In the Southern Alberta coal-mining town of Lethbridge, theatre development was conditioned by many factors similar to those affecting Fort Macleod. Lethbridge also felt the strong presence of the N.W.M.P. and the first entertainments were most certainly held at the barracks. The cultural and ethnic background, as well as the attitude, of the social elite also bore some striking similarities to the elite of Fort Macleod. In his paper, "The Actors Excelled Their Efforts...Amateur Theatricals in a Small Prairie Town 1880-1900," Chesley J. Skinner writes:

> The upper echelon of the community were English-speaking and were from Great Britain and parts of Canada and the United States. These people were the managers, merchants and professionals, and they maintained an aggressive attitude towards creating a facsimilie [sic] of life as it existed "back home."[42]

In order to create this facsimile, amateurs again formed clubs and societies in order to provide the local entertainment. Late nineteenth century dramatic groups included the N.W.M.P. Dramatic Club and the Lethbridge Musical and Dramatic Society.[43] These local amateur groups produced both variety concerts and full-length plays. Even amateur entertainers from Fort Macleod travelled to Lethbridge in order to join forces with the local amateurs. In 1888, the Macleod Gazette commented on the Lethbridge concert:

> The concert and theatricals at Lethbridge on Thursday night passed off very successfully, Mrs. Godwin sang for the first time at Lethbridge, and charmed the large audience. The Macleod contingent covered themselves with glory.[44]

By 1891, Lethbridge had its own Opera House which had the capability to seat 400 theatre patrons. This was built during an economic high in the history of Lethbridge, and represented the relative affluence of the age.

> The building was opened at a time when the coal industry was at a peak in Lethbridge with up to six trains a day leaving the yards; consequently, no expense was spared in ensuring that this "ornament of the town" would represent state-of-the-art furnishings and equipment.[45]

The Opera House accommodated both the amateur societies and professional touring companies, some of which also travelled to Fort Macleod. Live theatrical productions in Lethbridge were performed in halls until the early part of the twentieth century when several moving picture and vaudeville theatres were built.

> They were followed by the Griffith's Theatre, which opened in 1910 with a production of "The Gay Musicians" starring Miss Texas Guiman. It was renamed the

> Majestic Theatre almost immediately. The Majestic was designed for live performances, Sir Henry Lauder, the Dumbells and other highly-rated troupes played in it.[46]

Around the time of the building of the Empress in Fort Macleod, Lethbridge enjoyed a flurry of theatre construction which included the Morris (opened in 1911); the Empress and the Monarch (opened in 1912); and the Regent (in operation by 1915).[47]

Much of the theatrical activity in both Lethbridge and Fort Macleod came about as a result of similar conditions. Indeed, the whole picture of theatre on the prairies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seems to be composed of similar, if not common, elements of history, environment, economics and population. Skinner writes:

> Although the entertainment picture sketched here reflects the activities of one segment of the total population of this 19th Century prairie town, it does serve to point out the intensity with which the citizens of the "new western frontier" sought to maintain much of the lifestyle they had known prior to moving there.[48]

The Empress Theatre, then, was built during a time when significant theatrical activity was occurring in the West, both in the areas of amateur and professional performance, as well as the construction of permanent theatre buildings. As Fort Macleod shared many similarities with other prairie frontier towns, so also the Empress Theatre had much in common with other theatres, whether in Regina, Edmonton or Lethbridge. The Empress, then, represents theatre of the frontier era in Western Canada, a period marked by optimism, social and economic development, and the desire of the elite to emulate the cultural activity of Great Britain in order to civilize what was then considered the cultural wasteland of the West. The Empress Theatre is not unique in its purpose, its structure or its use. It is important because it remains standing today as a vestige of a significant period in Canada's theatre history. Ronald Clay writes in his unpublished paper, "The History of the Fort Macleod Empress Theater":

> The history of the Fort Macleod Empress Theater is a rich legacy notable not only in terms of its longevity, being the oldest operating theater in Alberta, but because it stands as a record of the social and cultural life of Fort Macleod. From its inception in 1910 [sic] it has served its patrons in the manner to which all prairie theaters aspire.[49]

The Empress Theatre may stand as a record of the social and cultural life of Fort Macleod, but it also stands for the larger composite of theatre in the West.

If prairie theatre entrepreneurs aspired to serve their patrons by providing a comfortable and luxurious house for the audience, an adequate stage for local amateur groups and travelling road shows, and the latest innovations in moving pictures, then the Empress certainly stands as a fine example of the aspirations of people associated with prairie theatre.

From 1874 to 1886, most live theatrical entertainment occurred at the barracks under the auspices of the local N.W.M.P. Dramatic clubs and societies performed there and the first travelling road shows to arrive in Fort Macleod had no choice but to make use of the same facilities. Late in 1885, however, a group of concerned Fort Macleod citizens calling themselves the "civic committee" decided that Fort Macleod needed a town hall. "Within two days of the initial meeting, the idea was conceived, the size and shape established and the method of financing determined for a town hall. The building was to be 28 feet by 60 feet and stand two storeys high."[50] Evidently, as soon as residents of Fort Macleod heard the good news, plans were underway for the use of the town hall. On January 26, 1886 the Gazette announced:

> The formation of a dramatic and musical club among the members of the Episcopal church is talked of. An effort will be made to get it into full working order as soon as possible. The present intention is to give several entertainments during the winter, after the town hall is finished.[51]

In eager anticipation of the new facilities, even N.W.M.P. dramatic groups made plans to abandon the barracks recreation room for the town hall. "A dramatic club is being formed in the barracks. It is probable that a performance will be given on the completion of the town hall."[52]

The Fort Macleod Town Hall was completed by February of 1886. The upper part of the building was leased for the serious pursuits of education and the legal courts, while the main floor was leased for the recreation of the townspeople. "The lower hall was rented out for balls at $20, public concerts by residents at $10, $15 for non-residents, and public meetings at $5."[53] Fort Macleod dramatic clubs regularly made use of the space for "theatricals," complete with intervals of musical selections by local orchestras and vocalists. Apparently, the Town Hall soon became known as the Fort Macleod Opera House, particularly in advertisements in the Gazette. Thus, a professional touring company was scheduled to perform in the "Opera House," yet after the performance, the reviewer often described the location as the "Town Hall." It is assumed, then, that the Opera House in Fort Macleod was merely the name for the theatrical space at the Town Hall.

Over the years, as printed in the local papers, the Fort Macleod Opera House featured such troupes as: The Clara Mathes Co. in 1903, the Stuartscomic Players, C.P. Walker's Comedians and the Beggar Prince Opera Co. in 1904, Margaret Neville, the Wm. Yule Company and Richards & Pringles' Minstrels in 1905, the Russell-Drew Co. in 1906, the Dandy Dixie Minstrels in 1907, and in 1909, the Lyceum all Star Comedy and Vaudeville Company. It was not until 1912, when the Empress Theatre was built, that Fort Macleod had a suitable replacement for the original Opera House. On January 18, 1912 the Macleod Advertiser reported: "The new opera house [Empress] will be finished in time for next season's business and then it will be a permanent and joyful farewell to the wretched old Town Hall."[54] The new Empress Theatre could accommodate companies that apparently were too large for the other small vaudeville and moving picture houses in Fort Macleod.

Perhaps one of the most auspicious theatrical events in the history of Fort Macleod occurred neither at the Town Hall nor at any other theatre in the town. On May 5, 1899, The Macleod Gazette announced the forthcoming event:

> That which promises to be the theatrical event in the history of Macleod will take place at the Rink, Thursday the 11th inst. when that most excellent organization, the Metropolitan Opera Co., will present for the first time here the bright and sparkling Comic Opera Bouffee "The Mascotte"....The company is a large one, numbering 30 people, and from the elegant cast of principals this promises to mark an epoch in the theatrical line in our town.[55]

Apparently, the large size of the cast demanded a larger stage than the Opera House or the barracks could provide. At this time, however, Fort Macleod had a two-sheet indoor rink which apparently served as an auditorium for the Metropolitan Opera Co.[56]

Although the Fort Macleod Town Hall accommodated travelling road shows and local dramatic groups, the town of Fort Macleod was to have three more theatres before the Empress was built in 1912. Around 1910, the first advertisements for these theatres appeared in the local paper. Although not widely publicized, these theatres appear to have been showcases for the advent of film or "photo plays" in Fort Macleod. The Macleod Advertiser announced the new management of the Majestic Theatre in May of 1910. The week's advertisement included: "Three Thousand Feet of Film. Pictures changed three times a week. Look for our grand Prize Drawing Contest. A Dinner Set to the holder of the lucky ticket."[57] This type of promotion and advertisement was typical of all three of these early theatres. The bill of fare for the week was also similar for all the theatres and could easily be summed up in a few short lines: "Don't Fail To Visit The Lyric Theatre. Macleod's Place of Refined Amusement. Open Every Evening. Continuous Performance From 8 To 11 P.M. High-Class Moving Pictures and Illustrated Songs. Always Something New and Nice."[58]

Indeed, of the moving picture theatres in Fort Macleod that pre-dated the Empress, the Lyric appears to be the most significant, as it received more publicity than either the Majestic or the Maple Leaf. In a 1911 special supplement to the paper which promoted Fort Macleod as "The Town of Manifest Destiny," The Macleod Advertiser features the Lyric Theatre, even including a photograph of the rather crude building which is captioned: "Home of the Lyric Theatre." According to the article, the Lyric was opened in April of 1911, with six hundred people in attendance. The Advertiser boasts of the modern facilities as well as the diverse entertainment featured at the Lyric:

> In addition to moving pictures, vaudeville acts are introduced from time to time, and have been a factor in

> enhancing the popularity of the Lyric. Mrs. H.W. Benson is an artiste of exceptional talent as a vocalist, and sings at all performances. To her is due considerable credit for making the Lyric a success....
>
> The people of Macleod are heavily indebted to Mr. Benson for giving them a playhouse of such a high standard as the Lyric.[59]

There are very few references to the Lyric Theatre other than the small advertisements which appear in the paper up until 1912. It seems that these early moving picture theatres did not receive much media attention, as the newspapers make very little reference to the theatres and rarely review either the photo plays or the vaudeville acts which supposedly appeared there. However, in 1912, just weeks after the opening of the Empress, The Macleod Spectator mentions the Lyric Theatre on the front page:

> The ownership of the Lyric Theatre, the pioneer moving picture house of Macleod, changed hands yesterday, A.E. Jones having disposed of his interests to J. Norgrove, the well-known painter. Mr. Norgrove has already taken possession and intends to keep the pictures strictly up-to-date.[60]

Following this sale, the interests of the newspapers and the theatre-going public of Fort Macleod became more focused on the Empress Theatre. Fortunately for the Empress, the Lyric Theatre was gutted by a fire in October of 1912, thus eliminating a major competitor. The Macleod Spectator described the event in some detail:

> Fire, the origin of which is a mystery, at an early hour on Monday morning gutted the Lyric Theatre on Twenty-fourth street.
>
> The building is owned by P. Burns, and has been used as a moving picture house for the past year.
>
> As the building would undoubtedly have been torn down before long, Mr. Burns probably does not regard

> his loss as being very serious....
>
> However, by the time that the flames had been subdued the theatre was a total wreck. The piano was destroyed and the chairs damaged beyond all hope of repair. In fact the whole interior of the building is a charred ruin.
>
> Mr. Atterly, local manager for the P. Burns Co., while disclaiming all definite knowledge of his company's building plans, said he had no doubt but that a new building would be erected in the spring.
>
> If the fire of Monday has this effect, the people of Macleod will be very glad.[61]

Two weeks later, The Macleod Spectator made a vague reference to a proposal for a new theatre, but this playhouse never materialized.[62]

From 1912 onward, the Empress Theatre commanded a significant portion of the weekly newspaper, with the result that a large part of the population was constantly informed of the activities at the Empress Theatre. The impact of the Empress Theatre on the town of Fort Macleod was such that it provided the momentum for a whole new era in the town's theatre history.

## Notes

[1] When Fort Macleod was incorporated in 1892, the "Fort" was deleted from the name and the town became officially known as the Town of Macleod. In 1949, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the arrival of the N.W.M.P. was celebrated and the name of the town was restored to the original Fort Macleod. For the sake of consistency, the town is referred to as Fort Macleod throughout the paper.

[2] In various sources the Oldman River is commonly spelled two ways: Oldman River or Old Man River. The former spelling is used in this paper.

[3] R. B. Nevitt, A Winter at Fort Macleod, ed. Hugh A. Dempsey (Calgary: McClelland and Stewart West, 1974) 19.

[4] Cecil E. Denny, The Law Marches West, ed. W. B. Cameron (Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1972) 59.

[5] Denny 52.

[6] Nevitt 27-28.

[7] Nevitt 59.

[8] Nevitt 78.

[9] Fort Macleod History Book Committee, Fort Macleod -- Our Colourful Past: A History of the Town of Fort Macleod from 1874 to 1924 (N.p.: n.p., 1977) 21.

[10] Nevitt 111.

[11] Denny 88.

[12] Our Colourful Past 337.

[13] Joy Duncan, "They Also Served... A Tribute to the

Early Wives," Red Serge Wives, ed. Joy Duncan (Edmonton: Lone Pine Publishing, 1985) 43.

[14] Our Colourful Past 23.

[15] Macleod Gazette, Oct. 24, 1882, N. pag.

[16] Macleod Gazette, Dec. 28, 1882, N. pag.

[17] Our Colourful Past 69-70.

[18] Macleod Gazette, Jan. 26, 1886, N. pag.

[19] Macleod Gazette, Feb. 9, 1886, N. pag.

[20] Duncan 45.

[21] Macleod Gazette, Apr. 11, 1888, N. pag.

[22] Lewis G. Thomas, "Alberta 1905-1980: The Uneasy Society," The New Provinces: Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1905-1980, eds. Howard Palmer and Donald Smith (Vancouver: Tantalus Research, 1980) 28.

[23] Gerald Friesen, The Canadian Prairies: A History (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1984) 237.

[24] James G. MacGregor, A History of Alberta (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1972) 130.

[25] G. Rider Davis, Q.C., "History of the Town of Fort Macleod," Fort Macleod: The Story of the North West Mounted Police 1874-1904 and Royal North West Mounted Police 1904-1920 and Royal Canadian Mounted Police 1920 to Present Time, ed. H. G. Lang (N.p.: n.p., 1958) 36.

[26] Our Colourful Past 38.

[27] Davis 36-37.

[28] Our Colourful Past 87-88.

[29] Rise M. Massey, "The Empress Theatre," unpublished paper prepared for Alberta Culture, Historical Resources, Historic Sites Service, 1981, 1.

[30] *Macleod Buzzer*, Oct. 21, 1911, 1.

[31] *Macleod Buzzer*, Nov. 12, 1911, 1.

[32] *Macleod Advertiser*, supplement, Aug, 1911, N. pag.

[33] Thomas 31-32.

[34] Irene Craig, "Grease-Paint on the Prairies," *Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba Papers III* 3rd ser. (1947): 38.

[35] Craig 40-45.

[36] Craig 50-51.

[37] E. Ross Stuart, *The History of Prairie Theatre* (Toronto: Simon & Pierre, 1984) 35.

[38] Stuart 35-37.

[39] Stuart 47.

[40] Stuart 49.

[41] John Orrell, preface, *Fallen Empires: Lost Theatres of Edmonton 1881-1914* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981) x.

[42] Chesley J. Skinner, "The Actors Excelled Their Efforts... Amateur Theatricals in a Small Prairie Town 1880-1900", unpublished paper presented at ACTH Conference, Winnipeg, 1986, 2.

[43] Skinner 8.

[44] Skinner 16.

[45] *Macleod Gazette*, Aug. 23, 1888, N. pag.

[46] Alex Johnston, "Allied Arts Council of Lethbridge: A History", occasional paper 1, Galt Museum Archives, 1983, 4.

[47] Johnston 4.

[48] Skinner 22.

[49] Ronald W. Clay, "The History of the Fort Macleod Empress Theater", unpublished paper prepared for Main Street Fort Macleod, 1989, 1.

[50] Our Colourful Past 33.

[51] Macleod Gazette, Jan. 26, 1886, N. pag.

[52] Macleod Gazette, Feb. 9, 1886 N. pag.

[53] Our Colourful Past 34.

[54] Macleod Advertisor, Jan. 18, 1912, 1.

[55] Macleod Gazette, May 5, 1899, N. pag.

[56] Our Colourful Past 68.

[57] Macleod Advertiser, May 6, 1910, 6.

[58] Macleod Advertiser, supplement, Aug. 1911, N. pag.

[59] Macleod Advertiser, supplement, Aug. 1911, N. pag.

[60] Macleod Spectator, July 16, 1912, 1.

[61] Macleod Spectator, Oct. 8, 1912, 1.

[62] Macleod Spectator, Oct. 22, 1912, 1.

# Chapter Two

## The Empress Theatre: Architecture and Management

Ronald Clay writes: "Macleod awaited the opening of the Empress with great anticipation."[1] This sense of anticipation was heightened by the abundance of articles appearing in the local newspapers. During most of 1912, the local press documented in detail the construction of the Empress Theatre from its very inception to the details of the opening night performance. It was _The Macleod Advertiser_ which broke the exciting news of the new "opera house" to the residents of Fort Macleod. On Thursday, January 18, 1912 the _Advertiser_ proudly announced:

> Macleod is to have a new opera house. In every particular except, perhaps size, it will not be surpassed by any in the province. J.S. Lambert has received the contract for its construction and it is anticipated that work will be begun as soon as weather permits.
>
> The theatre will be erected by J.[T] B. Martin on his lot on Twenty-Fourth street, just east of Cunningham Bros. hardware store. It will be of brick and stone and practically fireproof and have a seating capacity of 500. The stage will be 14 x 22 feet. The dressing rooms, baggage rooms and hot water heater will be in the basement. There will be an orchestra pit and every modern accessory of a first-class theatre.
>
> It will be artistically furnished and decorated and the dome front, with plate glass windows on the street, will be a great addition to the appearance of the town's chief thoroughfare.
>
> Mr. Martin is building the opera house which will be leased to a syndicate which controls a circuit of theatres throughout the West. The front part of the building will be occupied by two offices.
>
> The new opera house will be finished in time for next season's business and then it will be a permanent and joyful farewell to the wretched old Town Hall.
>
> Macleod needs a new theatre. She is going to have

it.[2]

The news of Fort Macleod's good fortune was significant enough to interest even The Lethbridge Daily Herald, which edited and reprinted the same article two days later.

The writer of this article concluded by dealing with Fort Macleod's need for a new theatre. Previous publications had described Fort Macleod's theatre facilities from a very positive perspective, leaving out any undesirable characteristics which might have tainted the overall image of Fort Macleod as a modern city. William Cousins comments on the endeavors of the press to portray Fort Macleod, as well as other southern Alberta towns, as great Western cities, comparable to large centres in the East:

> As you read over the papers you get such images of a lively bustling Metropolis; j.g. that when you see a photograph at Coalbanks, or Macleod you are astounded to see dirt roads and mud puddles, a few seedy looking buildings--perhaps a wooden sidewalk or two and Indians in blankets with babies on the backs of the women. This is the power of the press.[3]

It is therefore interesting that the January 18, 1912 article in the Advertiser should finally admit that "Macleod needs a new theatre" and that it will permanently replace the "wretched old Town Hall." Although the article does not provide a great amount of detail regarding the new structure, it still promises with great confidence that Fort Macleod will rank high with the rest of the province. The writer also stresses the importance of the exterior appearance of the new opera house as an attractive addition to Fort Macleod's Main Street. It appears that there was a definite need for a new theatre, and beyond that, a desire that its structure should reflect the optimistic era of a boom town.

There is little known about the man who purchased the lot on Twenty-Fourth Street in order to build a theatre. According to Our Colourful Past, Thomas B. Martin was born in Cayuga, Ontario in 1871. Apparently, Martin travelled to Fort Macleod as a very young lawyer and set up practice in 1906 with Edward P. McNeil.[4] Martin and McNeil maintained their partnership until 1912, when McNeil was appointed a District Court Judge. After this, Martin joined Malcolm MacKenzie and John W. McDonald to practise law as a firm for more than ten years. Martin continued to practice with McDonald until 1924.[5] Martin was married to one Ruby Gwendolyn Fraser. The couple had two children; Gwendolyn and Barney.[6] Suffering from diabetes, Thomas B. Martin died in 1927. Apparently, he was one of the first patients ever to be treated with insulin, as a test sample was sent to him from Dr. Banting.[7]

Although there are brief references in the Fort Macleod local history book to Martin's career as a lawyer, there is no mention of him being an entrepreneur or even demonstrating an interest in real estate. In fact, apart from the January 1912 announcement which names Martin as the owner of a new opera house, his name is scarcely mentioned again by any Fort Macleod publications.

On the other hand, J.S. Lambert's name appears quite frequently in the pages of Fort Macleod newspapers. As a prominent and successful contractor during the town's most prosperous years, J.S. Lambert played a significant role in creating the physical appearance of Fort Macleod, much of which remains today. Born in Lancashire, England, Lambert arrived in Fort Macleod as a member of the N.W.M.P. After his discharge, he travelled to the Klondike Gold Rush. When news of the war in South Africa reached him, Lambert enlisted in the Lord Strathcona Horse and served under Colonel Sam Steele. He left South Africa and returned to Fort Macleod in 1901. After a few months, Lambert returned to England as a trooper of the Lord Strathcona Horse to attend the coronation of Edward VII.[8]

Despite his exciting travels, Lambert was busy constructing many unique and aesthetically pleasing buildings in Fort Macleod. Lambert's daughter Olive Urch writes in Our Colourful Past: "Many buildings in Macleod were built by Jim Lambert. They include: The Hudson's Bay Co. building, Macleod Municipal Hospital, American Hotel, Reach and Co. Block, the White Hall, the School, McDonnell [MacDonnell] Block, and the arena plus many others."[9]

The Macleod Advertiser carried frequent advertisements for Lambert which very simply stated his trade as "contractor and builder." In 1911, The Advertiser described Lambert as an active and important member of the business community.

> Regardless of the viewpoint from which it may be considered, Mr. Lambert's business is entitled to rank with the leading enterprises of this city. Mr. Lambert has been connected with the construction of practically every business building in Macleod, as well as many of the finest residences....
>
> Mr. Lambert has several large contracts under way at the present time and the importance of his business as an industry can be gauged by the fact that he has an average of thirty-five men on his pay roll.[10]

Lambert also took an interest in municipal affairs as Chief of the fire brigade,[11] long-standing member of Town Council, and chairman of the works and property committee. Lambert also supervised building activity and was a member of the school board.[12]

With all of his experience and workmanship behind him, as well as his community involvement, it is not surprising that Lambert signed the contract in 1912 for the construction of Fort Macleod's new opera house, soon to be named the Empress Theatre. It is not known whether Lambert had ever built a theatre previous to the Empress, but it is obvious that his superior workmanship gave him the qualifications necessary to build a theatre.

In 1909, for example, Lambert constructed the MacDonnell Block East, located adjacent to the lot where the Empress would be constructed in 1912. This building represents some of Lambert's finest work. An Alberta

Culture brochure describes the features of this building in some detail:

> The MacDonnell Block is one of the most distinctive commercial buildings in Fort Macleod. The design of this two-storey sandstone and brick building is representative of the Romanesque Revival Style as it was adapted in Alberta....Romanesque Revival architecture is characterized by the appearance of arched doors and windows to create a rhythmic pattern across the facade. Walls are also usually clad with rough-faced stonework. These characteristics were exemplified in the MacDonnell building....[13]

Although of a different style than the Empress Theatre, the MacDonnell Block displays Lambert's expertise as a builder.

As the people of Fort Macleod waited in anticipation for the opening of the new opera house, brief news items kept them informed as to the progress of construction. Apparently, furnishings for the theatre arrived very soon. Under "Local News" in the February 1, 1912 edition of The Macleod Advertiser, one of the first details regarding the new opera house is revealed to the public. "The piano for the new theatre has arrived, so they are all ready for the music, at all events."[14] Of course, in the age of vaudeville and silent pictures, the piano was an essential fixture for any theatre.

Apparently, actual construction of the theatre did not begin until sometime in March of that year. On March 14 The Advertiser announced: "Contractor Lambert has the long timber out for the new theatre, but it is too cold to start the concrete work yet."[15] Construction must have advanced at a rapid rate, for a short two months later The Advertiser commented on the exterior of the theatre: "The brickfront of the new theatre makes an imposing showing on 24th street."[16]

Another month passes before the citizens of Fort Macleod are informed about the opening date for the new theatre. On June 4, 1912, The Macleod Spectator announces not only the expected date for opening, but also the names of the theatre managers. This exciting news made front page headlines:

> The handsome moving picture theatre which is being created on Twenty-fourth street by T.B. Martin will be completed in about two weeks, and it is expected that it will be opened to the public on July 1.
>
> Mr. Martin has leased the theatre for a period of five years to Lotz and McRae, who have similar theatres at Medicine Hat and in a B.C. town.
>
> J.S. Lambert had the contract for the erection of the building.[17]

This article is also the first to describe the new theatre as a "moving picture theatre" rather than an opera house. For the residents of Fort Macleod, the propect of seeing films in a legitimate moving picture theatre must have increased their anticipation of the opening.

Two days after The Spectator released its news, The Advertiser made a similar announcement. However, this article included a name for the new theatre:

> The new theatre may be opened on the 15th Contractor Lambert thinks. It is to be named the "Dreamland" and has been leased by Lotz and McRae, the well-known moving picture show people of Medicine Hat. It will be completed by July 1st, at all events.[18]

Of course the name "Dreamland" evoked images of fantasy and escape for the theatre patrons of the day. There is no indication, however, why the Dreamland was very shortly renamed the Empress. According to a later article in The Macleod Spectator, the theatre which McRae operated in Medicine Hat was also named the Dreamland, while his Vernon, British Columbia theatre was called the Empress.[19] Either choice of name then would have associated the new Fort Macleod theatre with McRae's chain of establishments.

Regardless of Lambert's optimistic thinking, the new theatre was still under construction on the fifteenth of June. The Advertiser, however, was still closely monitoring the progress of the theatre as well as other buildings under construction in Fort Macleod. It is obvious that the Empress was erected during a great rush of building activity in the town. On June 13, 1912 The Advertiser reported:

> The sound of the hammer and saw are heard in Macleod from seven o'clock in the morning until six o'clock in the evening....The new Methodist parsonage is under way, being ready for the roofers and shows that it is going to be a handsome building. The plastering is nearly dry in the new Dreamland Theatre and the floor is down. Numerous other buildings are in course of construction and the town presents a busy appearance.[20]

The economic prosperity enjoyed by the town of Fort Macleod was manifested in the number and quality of new buildings being erected at the time, not the least of which was the new theatre.

On the Saturday evening of June 29, 1912, the Empress

Theatre was opened to the public and officially named. Detail about the opening night is limited. The Macleod Advertiser briefly reports the events of the auspicious occasion on the following Thursday:

> The new moving picture theatre, "The Empress", as it has been finally decided to name it, was opened on Saturday night and a big crowd took advantage of the opportunity to make an inspection. It is certainly a beautiful place of amusement, with up-to-date chairs and appliances. R.J. McRea is the manager and M. Ryan the operator. A pianist furnishes the music.[21]

The brevity of the article suggests that perhaps the local press was not in attendance on the opening night. The statements reveal no detail regarding size, interior or exterior design, furnishings, or stage and screen size. Beyond this lack of detail regarding the physical elements of the Empress, there is no indication of what entertainment was featured that night. This lack of detail regarding the actual show is uncharacteristic of the typical reporting in the papers of the day. It is unclear, therefore, whether a film was presented or whether the theatre was opened merely for the inspection of the residents of Fort Macleod. Perhaps a kind of open house took place whereby patrons could "inspect" the facilities, as the article suggests. In American Vaudeville as Ritual, Albert F. McLean describes the public inspection of the New Theatre in Boston whereby two thousand invited guests and dignitaries inspected the theatre two days before the opening performance.[22]

Two weeks following the initial inspection of the

Empress, The Macleod Advertiser announces: "A handsome new electric sign is being placed in position at the Empress Theatre today."[23] It is The Spectator, however, which finally decides to feature the Empress Theatre. The article not only speaks favourably of the theatre, but also reveals some detail regarding physical aspects of the building. This is one of the only significant articles devoted entirely to the Empress Theatre building and its management. This time, the writer is reporting from firsthand experience, as the article is headlined: "New Theatre Credit to Town: Spectator Man Shown Through Empress by Manager McRae, Who Has String of Similar Houses." The feature article of The Spectator of August 13, 1912, reads:

> In these days, when advertising a city, one is apt to leave everything to the newspapers or to a publicity man, and let it go at that. But there is another think coming and we have to throw out the glad hand to the man who comes into a place to entertain the people and give them not only a comfortable and palatial house to sit in, but a good, clean show in the bargain. This is what [he] obtains in the new Empress Theatre, which a Spectator man was privileged to look over from top to bottom on Thursday night last.
>
> K.J. McRae is a past master at catering for the public in the moving picture show business, and has given to Macleod one of the finest little theatres in the whole province of Alberta. This is admitted by men who have visited the Empress from Calgary and other cities. Mr. McRae operates the famous "Dreamland" Theatre at Medicine Hat, and has also another "Empress" in full swing at Vernon, B.C. and is now building two other similar establishments in well known B.C. points.
>
> Everything is perfectly safe; there is no fire-trap business here like they have in Calgary, and the 450 people who can be accommodated can always hold their seats with a feeling of perfect safety. The operating room, where the machine is housed, is big enough to lodge a family, not a little cubby hole as is usual in most "movies." The floors are asbestos lined

> and there is absolutely no danger--not a particle! The arrangements of the stage are perfect. Mr. McRae has installed fine dressing rooms, and steam heating, and will put on good plays when the good plays come around, so that his patrons can have a change of menu.
>
> The Spectator man was pleased with a slide which Mr. McRae threw on the screen when he was there. It represented a big maple leaf, with the Duke of Connaught's portrait in the centre and underneath "Welcome to Macleod; the centre of the best farming district in the entire great west."[24]

Although the article introduced the reading public to the Empress, the interior of the theatre is described only in very general terms. The actual dimensions of the theatre are never described.

There is an obvious preoccupation with safety, apparent in the references to fire and the desirability of an asbestos floor. In his book, American Vaudeville as Ritual, Albert F. McLean, Jr. explains the preoccupation with fire safety in the much larger and more lavish vaudeville palaces of the American East. It is likely that the preoccupation with fire safety at the Empress Theatre was influenced by universal fears. McLean writes:

> As some of these details of contruction indicate, the planners of American theatres were not solely concerned with the sensual man and his response. Audiences were made up of prudent, practical persons who were well informed by the press of the dangers in mass gatherings, particularly the threat of fire. All knew of the great city fires of Chicago and San Francisco, and particularly the theatre fires--the worst of which was the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago in 1906 in which hundreds of lives were lost.[25]

Potential customers of the Empress must have been reassured by the fire precautions which were described in the

Spectator.

The intention of management to use the Empress Theatre for live theatrical entertainment as well as film is also revealed in the Spectator article. As well as mentioning the dressing rooms, the writer also declares McRae's promise to "put on good plays when the good plays come around". It is therefore assumed that the physical arrangement of the Empress Theatre was suitable for both film and live performance and that it was originally designed with this dual purpose in mind. At the time the Spectator article was written, August 13, 1912, the main prospect of live entertainment appears to have been the touring companies. There is to this point no suggestion of local amateurs using the facilities at the Empress.

According to the original blueprints, the total main floor area of the building was 3564 square feet, with dimensions of thirty-six feet in width and ninety-nine feet in length. The main composition of the structure was brick and concrete.

The front of the Empress was brick with galvinized iron cornices. Noted features on the front included the open arch which was approximately fifteen feet wide and fifteen feet high. The archway was flanked by office windows approximately two feet by four feet in size. A three foot diameter round window was located in the lantern room, directly above the centre of the archway. The window was flanked by ornamental detail. The two front corners of the theatre were projected a few inches outward from the rest of the building and a foot or more upward, thus creating a box-like appearance while emphasizing and adding depth to the entrance area.

Viewed from the street and through the open archway was the domed, multi-sided ticket booth. On each side of the booth were two mirrored doors leading into the main theatre. The entrance was well lit, with feature lights completely encircling the ticket booth. There was approximately one hundred and twenty square feet dedicated to office space on the left side of the entrance, while the right side included a smaller office and a staircase which led to the lantern room, which was thirteen feet by thirty-six feet in size and located immediately above the entrance area.

The auditorium was thirty-six feet wide by seventy-two feet eight inches long, including the orchestra pit but not the stage area. The floor was composed of hardwood maple and had a three-foot fall from the back of the auditorium to the stage. Ceiling height was eighteen feet nine inches at the back of the auditorium and twenty-one feet nine inches at the front. The walls were constructed of plaster and burlap and the ceiling of decorative metal.

The orchestra pit was six feet by sixteen feet and had a twelve-inch drop. Although it was only twelve inches deep, it was defined by a twenty-four inch high railing. At the immediate right of the orchestra pit was an exit door to the outside.

The total stage area was thirty-six feet in width and fourteen feet in depth, with a proscenium arch opening twenty-two feet wide and fifteen feet high. The stage floor was raised four feet from the auditorium level. The front of the stage floor was curved, with a maximum thrust of two feet beyond the proscenium at the centre.

The basement of the Empress was 972 square feet in area, located mainly under the stage and orchestra pit. The entrances to the basement level and the stage exit were located at stage left. The basement housed three dressing rooms, with two measuring four feet six inches by seven feet; and the third measuring six feet by seven feet. There was also a small baggage room and bathroom located in the basement. The balance of the basement was utilized by the boiler room and fuel storage room.

As early as November 7, 1912, there was already a hint of potential problems at the Empress Theatre. The existence of live theatrical production at the Empress Theatre was threatened, and the first indication of managerial difficulties became apparent. Due to financial losses as a result of small audiences, McRae literally threatened to stop bringing travelling companies to Fort Macleod. The idealized image of the Empress Theatre serving the public, which was portrayed in the early 1912 articles in the local papers, was rapidly changing to an image of a struggling business, based on the interest of management to operate at a profit. On November 7, 1912, The Macleod Advertiser almost chastizes the Fort Macleod public on behalf of McRae:

> The manager of the Empress Theatre, who, outside of the satisfaction felt through giving his patrons something decidedly superior in the line of entertainment has to figure all performances in the light of dollars and cents the results of his endeavors Monday night were a decided disappointment [sic]. Mr. McRae tells me that after paying the company the guarantee necessary to bring them here he had the immense sum of two dollars and seventy-five cents left to himself, which means a net loss to him of some forty odd dollars. This on top of a loss in bringing the Paul Gilmore company here a couple of weeks ago makes him state further in rather emphatic language that if the people of Macleod wish to have any shows brought to town really worth seeing they will simply have to patronize him when he does bring them--otherwise--well, otherwise he won't bring them as, funny thing you know, he says he cannot very well live on the winds of Macleod and the good wishes of its citizens.[26]

Perhaps McRae is placing too much of the blame for his losses on the audience, for an earlier article appearing in The Macleod Advertisor on October 17, 1912 reviewed the performance of the Paul Gilmore company and stated that it played before a large audience.[27] Whatever the reason for the losses, this is the first indication of any difficulty experienced by McRae in his management of the Empress.

A second misfortune strikes the Empress when, a little more than a month later, the theatre suffers a robbery. The Macleod Spectator carries the story on December 31, 1912:

> The Empress Theatre was burglarized some time between Saturday night and Monday morning, and the contents of the till in the box office amounting to something over six dollars in nickels and dimes

> abstracted.
>
> The lock was pried off the drawer which contained the money. A drawer in the manager's office contained a considerably larger sum but this was not touched.
>
> As the doors were all found locked in the morning, the police are of the opinion that the robbery was committed by someone with a knowledge of the interior of the theatre.[28]

McRae was concerned over the financial losses suffered as a result of small audiences; however, he must have been very concerned about potential security problems for the Empress. Perhaps McRae even suspected some of his own employees. Managing the Empress Theatre was already proving difficult for McRae, for within a few months of the theatre's opening, he had experienced at least two major problems.

Regardless of the financial difficulties McRae experienced in 1912, two improvements were made to the Empress in 1913. Both improvements affected the stage area. On May 29, 1913, The Macleod Advertisor announced: "The Empress Theatre is to put in an advertising drop curtain."[29] Presumably, local businesses purchased space on the curtain in order to advertise goods and services to the crowd awaiting the evening's feature. This curtain undoubtedly provided McRae with an additional source of revenue. Unfortunately, there is no indication as to what specific businesses advertised on the new curtain at the Empress; however, the very existence of such an advertising curtain serves as an indication that the business community had some measure of faith in the Empress Theatre.

On October 23, 1913, The Macleod Spectator heralded the event of a coming performance of "The Beggar Prince Opera". Along with tantalizing photographs of the company in performance, the advertisement announced this exciting news: "The Empress Stage will be deepened, and Macleod will have a Real Theatre, with a Good Stage, Inclined Floor, and Opera Chairs. Every seat will give the occupant a chance to see without taking all the rubber out of his neck."[30] The stage was apparently deepened by ten feet,[31] with Lambert employing C.W. Stephens to make the renovations in the evenings.[32] This physical improvement in the theatre's performance space is a possible indication that McRae was beginning to make a profit by featuring live performance. Alternately, McRae may have been speculating that bigger and better companies would attract the large audiences that he needed. These stage improvements would make the Empress more suitable for live performance, thereby allowing McRae to bring in larger and more renowned companies. This may have been McRae's intention, because only two weeks after "The Beggar Prince" appeared at the Empress, another comic opera arrived in Fort Macleod. "The Last Waltz" was presented by Pollard's Australian Juvenile Opera Co. on November 11, 1913. According to The Macleod Spectator the Australian troupe was a "noted company."[33] It is likely then that both of these opera companies were popular with audiences, but also required a larger stage area than the

Empress had previously been able to provide.

For the remainder of 1913, and much of 1914, besides regular reels of film, the bill of fare at the Empress included several performances by well-known travelling companies, several well-publicized performances by local dramatic groups, a political rally, and numerous wrestling matches. During this period of time, it also appears that the Empress was under a temporary management as there are several references to a Manager Scougall[34] in the local papers. Also, on July 9, 1914, The Macleod Spectator produced an advertisement for the Empress which announced that the theatre was "again under management of K.J. McRae" and that the people of Fort Macleod should "come and renew old acquaintanceships."[35]

Ironically, there is no mention of financial difficulties for the Empress Theatre until Manager McRae returns. On August 6, 1914, The Macleod Spectator comments on McRae's financial losses, again blaming the people of the town for the manager's misfortunes:

> Macleod evidently doesn't care for vaudeville. Manager McRae of the Empress had a number of Pantages acts here last night and they were all good acts too, but the people did not turn out in very large numbers.
>
> The result was a considerable financial loss to Mr. McRae.
>
> The acts were all faultless. There was an animal act, which was clever, while the musical turn was excellent. All the other acts were good. The whole bill was enjoyable.
>
> The Spectator hopes that Mr. McRae will not be discouraged with one tidal but will bring these fine Pantages performers here again. Perhaps next time

there will be a larger audience.[36]

Although earlier reviews in 1914 indicate that frequently there were large audiences at the Empress, and that the townspeople were indeed supporting the theatre, The Macleod Spectator continued to maintain its sympathetic attitude toward management.

Another significant improvement to the quality of entertainment at the Empress was announced on December 31, 1914. This time the improvement involved performance rather than physical properties. The Macleod Spectator wrote:

> For some days past the management of the Empress Theatre have delighted their patrons by supplying an orchestra during the evening performance.
>
> The orchestra is composed of three pieces: violin (C.R. Newton); piano (Mrs. Kerr Seymour); and trombone (H.L. Field) and the music supplied is of a class second to none in the southern part of the Province.
>
> Macleod should certainly be grateful and appreciate the management for the way the comforts of the patrons are considered.[37]

Management improved the quality of the entertainment being offered at the Empress by enhancing both film and live performance with an orchestra. It is not known how regularly the orchestra was engaged, nor how long this particular group of musicians performed together. However, at least in the opinion of the press, the quality of the music was at least satisfactory. On January 21, 1915, The Macleod Spectator announced that both Charlie Chaplin and John Barrymore films would be featured at the Empress, and that "the music is always good."[38] As well, The Macleod

Spectator pays particular attention to C.R. Newton in a January 21, 1915 review of an Irish Concert held at the Empress:

> The selection by the Empress Orchestra contributed matrially [sic] to the programme. In fact, the bright, particular star of the evening was Mr. Newton, whose violin selections gave the greatest pleasure to his auditors. Mr. Newton's technique is little short of marvellous, and it is quite apparent that he is a highly trained musician. His selections were all encored most enthusiastically, and he was very generous in responding. This talented young musician also possesses a fine voice, and his songs were received with no less enthusiasm than his violin numbers. A brilliant musical career is in store for this young man.[39]

The Empress Orchestra is frequently praised by The Macleod Spectator throughout 1915. As well, the Empress often featured the skilled Mr. Newton as a soloist for special musical programs supplementing films during an evening's entertainment.

Although McRae continues to manage the Empress throughout 1915, on May 20 of that same year, The Macleod Spectator briefly mentions a Manager Hicks making promises to the public of Fort Macleod.[40] Apparently McRae operated as general manager with some assistance.

By August of 1915, MaRae was again experiencing financial difficulty with the Empress Theatre; this time resulting from a disagreement with the owner, T.B. Martin. This disagreement over rent brought about the temporary closure of the Empress. Manager McRae, however, provided an enterprising and inventive solution to the closure of the

Empress which ensured that "the show would go on" in Fort Macleod. On August 19, 1915, The Macleod Spectator revealed the details of the rather scandalous story:

> After being without the pleasures of a picture show for two days, the Town Hall was opened last evening for the first time in the history of the town to supply the moving picture fans with amusement.
>
> The closing of the Empress Theatre which took place on Monday, came as a complete surprise both to Manager McRae and the general public. The reason for the closure of the building was a disagreement between Mr. McRae and the owner of the building over the rent, which is very high, and resulted in the bailiff taking possession of the building.
>
> Mr. McRae was, however, equal to the occasion, and finding himself without a place in which to put on a show, he went to the Town Council which met the same evening, and after laying the facts before the Councillors secured the use of the Town Hall.
>
> Assisted by a loyal staff, Mr. McRae at once proceeded to fix up the Hall, and by arduous work had his plant installed last evening....
>
> The show, as usual, was excellent, and a parody on "Are We Down Hearted," sung by Mr. Newton simply brought down the house.
>
> Mr. McRae briefly addressed the audience, explaining the reason of his removal and thanking them for their patronage in the past. He also assured them that he would in the future do all in his power to supply them with a good entertainment, and there is no doubt from the hearty reception given him that he will not lack from patrons in the future.
>
> For the past three years Mr. McRae has been connected with the Empress Theatre, and has undoubtedly given his patrons satisfaction during that time, and practically every resident of the town will wish him success in his new venture.[41]

It is clear from this article that McRae was the popular figure in the dispute and that the people of Fort Macleod were happy to continue patronizing his theatre business, no matter where it was located. Perhaps their loyalty was more to McRae than the Empress itself. In fact, McRae's theatre business at the Town Hall was called the "People's Theatre." It is likely that the high rent demanded by the owner may have contributed to McRae's financial difficulties, even as early as 1912. In any event, McRae proved that he was determined to persevere, no matter what the inconvenience.

Although the Empress was closed and was without management for a short time in 1915 during the disagreement between Martin and McRae, it was soon providing entertaiment for the public in direct competition with McRae. Although it is not known who managed the theatre at this time, or whether Martin managed it himself, the Empress still featured film and the Empress Orchestra.[42]

The issue of the Empress Theatre versus the People's Theatre continued to be a subject of controversy during the autumn of 1915. It was particularly controversial within the Town Council, as renting out the premises of Town Hall to McRae provided the town with considerable income. The whole issue of renting out the Town Hall and various opinions of how much should be charged in rent became the hotly debated subject of the November 1, 1915 Town Council meeting. On November 4, the front page of The Macleod Spectator included highlights from the meeting:

> The most interesting discussion at the Council meeting on Monday last arose over the application of Manager McRae of the People's theatre [sic] for an extension of his lease of the Town Hall for picture show purposes. Two Councillors were in favor of granting the lease at a $50.00 rental but three other Councillors wanted $100 rent, while Councillor Dickson, of all men, was actually opposed to renting the Hall at

> all costs and so depriving the town of a nice revenue....
>
> After the minutes of the last meeting had been duly passed the question of the renewal of the lease of the Town Hall to Manager McRae for picture show purposes was first taken up. Mr. McRae and T.B. Martin were both present at the meeting and Mr. Martin, at the invitation of the Mayor, made a lengthy discourse to the Council and contended first that if the hall was rented a much higher rental than at present should be charged, and secondly that the Council should refuse to rent the hall at all and by so doing stop competition with the Empress theatre.[43]

Throughout the course of the evening, McRae presented his side of the argument and again asked for the renewal of the lease. The Councillors debated the issue, with Councillor John L. Fawcett remarking that "...he could not see why the town should feel itself called upon to lose a chance of obtaining a revenue at the present time simply to protect the Empress...."[44] By the end of the evening, McRae was granted a renewal of his lease, but at the significantly higher rate of one hundred dollars per month for a six month period.[45] Once again, McRae was faced with the problem of high rent for theatre space, the same problem which forced him to vacate the premises of the Empress.

Although McRae's move from the Empress to the Town Hall in August of 1915 was very sudden, his announcement to return to the Empress was as equally abrupt. The Macleod Spectator revealed the details the week after McRae made the announcement to his patrons:

> A decided surprise was sprung on the capacity house at the People's theatre [sic] last Friday night when Mr. McRae put an announcement on the screen to the effect that the theatre would be closed after the shows

> on the following night. This was followed immediately by a second announcement saying that he would re-open the Empress on Monday night. The first announcement brought a surprised gasp from everybody, while the second, to put it mildly, brought down the house, and judging by the compliments flung out to Mr. McRae he should have felt decidedly flattered....
>
> The people of Macleod have surprised even themselves by their continued loyalty to Mr. McRae, a man who knows his business, and we join with them in wishing him every success back at his old stand.[46]

Apparently, McRae and Martin must have come to an agreement over the rent of the Empress Theatre. The comments of the press indicate that McRae was indeed a popular figure in the town of Fort Macleod and that the audience support was with him, no matter at what theatre he was located.

After McRae's return to the Empress the Spectator reports that large audiences attended performances of both film and travelling companies. A very brief remark on the affluence of the people of Fort Macleod was made in The Macleod Spectator on March 23, 1916. "If anyone attended the Empress theatre on Tuesday evening last and had the impression that Macleod was broke, they would have gone away with quite a different idea."[47] The Empress was apparently doing quite well, and there were no appeals from McRae asking for larger audiences.

In May of 1916, McRae was forced to implement a new theatre-goers tax on the patrons of the Empress. The Macleod Spectator attempted to explain the details of the tax on May 25, 1916:

> The new theatre-goers' tax, the result of a bill put through at the last session of the legislature,

> comes into effect on Thursday, June 1st. The bill provides for a tax of one cent on each ticket purchased for a moving picture performance, 2 1/2c on each ticket purchased for a vaudeville or other road show and costing less than one dollar, and five cents on each ticket purchased costing $1.00 or more....
>
> Manager McRae looks for a certain amount of confusion and inconvenience and expects to be talked hoarse with explanations until the good people become accustomed to this new tax, but as he, along with all other theatre managers, has to abide by the law and is under heavy bond to see that this law is carried out he hopes that the people will take this new tax with as good a grace as possible and do as much as is in their power to help him avoid confusion and delays at the ticket office.[48]

The confusion that McRae anticipated was probably due to the fact that the tax had to be paid by purchasing separate tickets which were then deposited into a collection box. An official from Edmonton collected the ticket boxes. The tax tickets could also be purchased in quantities of five and could be used at any theatre in Alberta.[49]

Just one month after McRae's announcement of the new tax, Fort Macleod residents would learn that Manager McRae was leaving the Empress Theatre. A brief note in the June 29, 1916 edition of The Macleod Spectator stated: "Mr. K. H. McRae, late of the Empress theatre, intends leaving for the East the end of this week."[50] The public was formally introduced to the new manager of the Empress by a letter, dated June 26, 1916, which appeared in the Spectator on July 6, 1916. In his letter as the new theatre manager, C.F. Bowker clearly stated his intentions to the public:

> You are probably aware of the fact that there has been a change in the management of the Empress theatre and I am using this medium to inform you that I have

> taken over the entire management of this theatre and whilst I fully realize that my predecessor has set a very high standard in the case of entertainment he has been furnishing you with, I wish to say that I am going to maintain that high standard and procure for you the very best pictures I can get....
>
> The musical end of the entertainment will also receive a large share of my attention. Arrangements are now under way to procure a first-class violinist, and you will find that the music will be of the highest order possible....
>
> In conclusion I would say that I am here to provide you with the class of entertainment you want and in order that I may be able to give you this, your co-operation and support are necessary and which I feel confident will be forthcoming.[51]

It appears that Bowker acted immediately on his promises to maintain high standards and provide quality entertainment for the patrons of the Empress. On August 3, 1916, The Macleod Spectator noted: "The Empress is certainly running a good programme these last few weeks. First-class films are the order of the day."[52] On August 24, the Spectator again complimented Bowker: "Mr. Bowker is certainly doing his best to provide the people of Macleod with a first-class show. His latest move is a three-piece orchestra, upon which he should be congratulated."[53] Apparently, the Empress Theatre had been operating without the Empress Orchestra for some time. It is not known who played in Bowker's original three-piece orchestra, but by September 7, 1916, The Spectator introduced a new violinist at the Empress:

> The Empress theatre has secured the services of Professor Little of Calgary as violinist, commencing on Monday next. It is understood Prof. Little will be prepared to take pupils on the violin.[54]

By November 30, 1916 Professor Little's credentials were revealed to the residents of Fort Macleod in The Macleod News.

> J.A. Little is open to accept pupils for the violin and piano. Mr. Little studied violin with one of De Beriot's favourite pupils. De Beriot was founder of the famous Franco-Belgian School of Music, the foremost school of music in the world, and the piano and theory and harmony under Dr. Bleukiron of the London College of Music.[55]

According to the compliments in the local papers regarding the quality of the moving pictures, live plays, and of the musical accompaniment, Bowker was fulfilling his promises to the patrons of the Empress Theatre. On December 7, 1916, The Macleod News stated: "Manager Bowker should be congratulated on the play at the Empress theatre last Monday night. Peg O' My Heart certainly takes some beating."[56] One week later, Bowker is also praised by The Macleod News for his efforts at securing the documentary film, "Britain Prepared": "This expensive production was secured by Manager Bowker only after a great deal of time and trouble, and reflects great credit on him in securing for Macleod audiences a program of this description."[57]

Local reporting throughout 1917 indicated that Bowker continued operating the Empress Theatre quite successfully. Advertisements from that year show a balance between live entertainment and film which appears to have worked well for Bowker. A typical programme of the week's entertainment posted in the newspaper contained at least one night of live entertainment. The live entertainment was then generally promoted with a large advertisment, one or two photographs and a press release which tantalized the town residents by promising a wonderful show. These releases were often concluded by a message from management which described the efforts expended in securing the show for the Empress. On January 4, 1917, The Macleod News described Bowker's efforts at securing "In Walked Jimmy," a four-act comedy starring George Summers and "a corking cast of fifteen New York actors":[58]

> The management of the Empress has been fortunate enough to secure this special attraction for Macleod and arrangements have been completed for the appearance of this company here on Tuesday, January 9th. The United Producers and the management of the Empress guarantee this attraction and believe that it will be received even more enthusiastically than was "Peg O' My Heart."[59]

The press release is concluded by instructions as to where tickets could be purchased. Tickets for live production at the Empress were sold at R.D. McNay's Drug Store until about 1915, after which Ferguson's Drug Store became the main ticket outlet for the Empress. Prices ranged from one dollar for reserved seats to seventy-five cents and fifty cents for general admission, and twenty-five cents for children. In the same edition of The Macleod News, although in a different column, a brief reference to admission is made: "Although 'In Walked Jimmy' is being brought to Macleod at a very heavy expense there will be no raise in the price of seats. But it is hoped that a full house will greet this Metropolitan production."[60] Live productions such as "In Walked Jimmy" appear to have been promoted very well. In the January 4, 1917 edition of The Macleod News there are no less than six references to the play as well as one promotional photograph.

Although the existing Empress orchestra continued to be praised throughout 1917, on November 1 The Macleod News announced that the Empress Theatre would be served by a new "Concert Orchestra":

> After several months of negotiating Manager Bowker has at last secured a special attraction for the music-lovers of Macleod, having engaged Mr. Fred C. Cutler and Miss Clarice May, late leader and accompanists of the Palliser Hotel, Calgary, who will commence Monday, Nov. 5, to play every evening and Saturday matinees at the Empress. These artists, besides being versatile concert entertainers, make a specialty of orchestral music for pictures, and will from that date arrange special programmes of music to fit all feature pictures. They have a large repertoire of music, which included many original compositions by Miss Clarice May. A special concert with the usual picture programme will be given on Monday, Nov. 5th, to introduce this new concert orchestra to the patrons of the Empress. There will be no advance in prices, and this will undoubtedly be the greatest money's worth ever offered to the public.[61]

The quality of musical accompaniment offered by the Empress was clearly important to the patrons of the theatre at that time. The orchestra not only enhanced the silent pictures but also provided music for local amateur concerts. In Fifty Years on Theatre Row, Ivan Ackery describes under what conditions a typical theatre orchestra operated:

> The orchestra would always play an overture to the

> feature, about forty-five minutes of music. You know, that got a lot of people interested in good music who'd never heard it before like that. When the silent movies were produced, a musical score would be composed to accompany it. The score would come in with the film, only a few days before the showing, and the orchestra would rehearse it, then play as background to the film. Those directors and musicians were brilliant men, working on very short notice. Unless there was a very special film, each one was run for about three days only. So you can imagine the work involved for the musicians.[62]

The Macleod News commented positively on the new concert orchestra after its first week of performance in Fort Macleod: "The new orchestra at the Empress Theatre is certainly the best ever seen in Macleod, and there is no doubt whatever the Macleod music-lovers will appreciate them."[63]

Bowker's success at the Empress continued well into 1918. By the fall of that year, however, the Spanish flu epidemic forced Bowker to close the doors of the Empress. James G. MacGregor writes in A History of Alberta: "The first Alberta cases occurred in Calgary on October 4 and its onslaught was so rapid that by October 18 all schools, churches and theatres in the province were closed and public meetings banned."[64] In Our Colourful Past, John Davis writes that the Spanish flu arrived in Fort Macleod by the first week in October, 1918. Wiping out whole families at a time, the flu struck down about one quarter of the residents of Fort Macleod and the surrounding area.[65] In order to stop the spread of the disease, the Government imposed strict regulations regarding public exposure. John Davis recalls a stricture which directly affected the Empress:

> On October 25, [1918], it became law that everyone, when outside his own home, would wear a mask of cheesecloth. These masks were worn for two hours and then thoroughly boiled before re-use. Many people wore a bag of camphor hung under their chins, which supposedly killed the germs. It has since been proven that these precautions were of no value.[66]

The Empress Theatre was closed from October 18 to December 2, 1918. On November 28 of that year, The Macleod News announced the re-opening of the Empress with the promise that the residents of Fort Macleod could enjoy the benefits of escapism to forget the horror of their dreadful ordeal with the Spanish flu:

> Bang goes the flu--the war is over. The Empress Theatre opens next Monday. The Kaiser is defeated and the local health board declare the 'flu is also in the has-been class and that it is safe to open all places of amusement. The only restriction is that everyone attending the picture show shall wear a mask whilst in the building. Masks will be on sale at the box office for those who may forget to bring theirs.
>
> Forget all about the 'flu. Come to the Empress to be amused and you will feel one hundred per cent better than you have during the past six weeks.
>
> The Empress will be thoroughly fumigated and cleaned before the opening and will be kept fumigated at all times.[67]

Unfortunately, the Empress could not make people feel "one hundred per cent better", because the flu epidemic was still persisting and any large gatherings only served to spread the disease further.[68] Management at the Empress tried to make the best of a bad situation. Film serials were shown from the point at which they had left off before the epidemic so that no one would miss any of the exciting chapters in the serial.

By spring of 1919, the Empress seems to have been operating fully. Concerts, roadshows, and films are billed regularly in the newspapers. Bowker makes no complaint to the people of Fort Macleod; however, on July 17, 1919, he writes an open letter to the public which seems to indicate that Bowker wished to educate the audience at the Empress in some simple etiquette.

> One of the largest events of the season will take place next Wednesday and Thursday when the well known novel of Major Rupert Hughes "The Unpardonable Sin" will be screened at the Empress Theatre. It is not necessary for me to enter into any eulogy of this picture here, but I am taking this means of trying to impress upon those who intend to see this wonderful picture, and that means almost every one, the necessity of being seated BEFORE the picture starts. You cannot possibly fully enjoy a picture of this kind unless you see it from the very beginning....If you cannot get to the Theatre on Wednesday by 8:30 you will be well advised to wait until Thursday and arrange to arrive in good time. There will be but one show each night and it will start at eight sharp. TRY TO BE ON TIME for this occasion.[69]

From Bowker's comments, it is possible to deduce that patrons of the Empress at this time were habitually late for film features. It is not known, however, whether the patrons were also generally late in arriving for live performances.

On October 9, 1919, The Macleod News announced that Hippodrome vaudeville would soon be appearing regularly on Thursday evenings at the Empress. Again, Bowker promised quality entertainment at his own expense:

> In securing the Hippodrome Circuit the Management of the Empress Theatre realized that it would be useless to bring anything but the best class of Vaudeville to Macleod if the patronage was to be maintained throughout the season. Therefore the cost of bringing this circuit was only a secondary consider[ation,] the first and foremost being the Quality. This it can be truthfully stated is of the highest order as every act that will appear here is identically the same that plays in most of the large western towns and cities in the United States and also from one end of Canada to the other.[70]

By November 13, 1919, Bowker announced that the Empress would no longer sell advance tickets for the weekly fare of Hippodrome Vaudeville. The Macleod News carried Bowker's announcement:

> Commencing tonight there will be no seats reserved for the Hippodrome Vaudeville which is at the Empress Theatre every Thursday night. This means that you can get the best seat in the house for fifty cents. When one considers that for this small outlay, one can see five excellent reels of pictures and a good clean bill of vaudeville, consisting of four new acts each week, there is no reason why everybody should not be able to enjoy this form of amusement.[71]

Originally, tickets for Thursday night Hippodrome Vaudeville had been seventy-five cents for reserved seats and fifty cents for general admission. Children were admitted for twenty-five cents. The drop in ticket prices likely meant that Bowker was trying to increase audience size. It is also possible that advance sales were slow for the weekly entertainment because vaudeville patrons could see a show on any given Thursday. Bowker likely foresaw that advance sales would become even more unnecessary as he increased the frequency of Hippodrome Vaudeville performances from one night to two nights per week. On November 20, 1919, The Macleod News carried the advertisement stating that Hippodrome Vaudeville would play at the Empress both Wednesday and Thursday, with any seat in the house selling at fifty cents.[72]

According to The Macleod News, the quality of Hippodrome Vaudeville was more than satisfactory. On December 5, 1919, the paper complimented Bowker for his efforts at bringing excellent vaudeville to Fort Macleod.

> The hippodrome vaudeville program now being shown at the Empress Theatre on Wednesday and Thursday evenings of each week is one of the best variety shows that have been given in Macleod for many a long day....The last two weeks their program has been equal to any hippodrome program shown in any of the larger cities, and this week's program is par excellence. We congratulate the manager of the local theatre on his being able to secure such a splendid vaudeville show and we heartily recommend these programs to the Macleod people.[73]

By 1920, vaudeville shows appeared at the Empress less frequently, as film began to gain popularity. On January 8, 1920, The Macleod News announced that the "Hip Vaudeville" show would play at the Empress Theatre the following Wednesday and Thursday. The same article, however, also reveals that vaudeville was no longer playing weekly at the Empress:

> On account of the exceptionally fine bill that is being presented by this Company the Manager of the Empress arranged with them to play Macleod for two days next week. Remember that this does not mean that there will be Vaudeville here every week....[74]

Hippodrome Vaudeville continued to appear at the Empress Theatre throughout 1920, although perhaps with less regularity than what was previously promised in 1919.

Admission prices at the Empress Theatre began to vary greatly, depending upon the type of show being offered. For a popular live act such as The Dumbells, seats were sold for seventy-five cents, one dollar, and one dollar and fifty cents,[75] while other live shows such as "The Goose Girl" by Scot Billy Oswald had admission prices ranging from fifty cents to one dollar.[76] For "Fair and Warmer", billed as "the greatest screen farce of the year", admission was only thirty-five cents including tax,[77] while for the photo play "Greased Lightning" admission was even less, at twenty-five cents for adults and ten cents for children.[78] The ten-reel production of "Cleopatra" was advertised as "a dollar picture to be shown in Macleod for fifty cents."[79] A dance held at the Empress Theatre featuring the Empress Orchestra had a different admission price for men and women: "Gents" were charged $1.00, while "Ladies" were admitted for $0.50.[80]

Bowker maintained a balance between live entertainment and moving pictures throughout 1920. When describing live shows, advertisements in the local paper often announced that the feature was "not a moving picture."[81] Obviously, it was necessary to clarify the nature of the evening's entertainment for the potential audience. Bowker was frequently praised for his efforts in Fort Macleod. It must have been with some surprise, therefore, that the residents of Fort Macleod read the news that Bowker was leaving. On August 11, 1920, The Macleod News bade a fond farewell to C.G. Bowker:

> We regret to record the departure of Mr. C. G. Bowker, for four years the popular manager of the Empress Theatre, who left for British Columbia last Thursday. Mr. Bowker came to Macleod in 1916, from Edmonton, with a wide experience in the moving picture business, and during his stay in our town he always endeavored to give the public the best possible service. His many friends and acquaintances in Macleod will wish him every success in his new surroundings.[82]

Throughout Bowker's management of the Empress, there were no indications of any conflict between himself as manager and T.B. Martin as owner.

After Bowker left the Empress, Fred Cutler of the Empress Orchestra took over management of the theatre. On September 9, 1920, Fred Cutler served his first notice to the public in The Macleod Times. Unfortunately, Cutler's notice announced a rise in ticket prices:

> Owing to the continued rise in the cost of pictures, etc., we are compelled to raise our prices....
>
> In this connection we would like to point out, that, Mr. Bowker signed contracts for these pictures last year and of course at considerably lower rates than present....
>
> We trust that our patrons will recognize our difficulties in this respect, and thank them in anticipation of their continued patronage.[83]

Cutler does not mention the costs of live shows, nor does he announce an increase in ticket prices for them. In fact, the frequency with which live acts appeared on the Empress Theatre stage decreased significantly during 1921. Much more space in the local papers was devoted to reviews and advertisements for moving pictures, while live acts received less attention. According to space allocated for the Empress Theatre in the local press, it appears that the road shows in particular appeared less frequently at the Empress than they had in some nine years.

A sharing contract signed by F. Vernon, W.H. Doucet and the Groves-Walker Company Limited for a July 1922 booking at the Regina Theatre gives an indication as to what conditions had to be met by both parties when a vaudeville road show came to a prairie theatre. Based on six nights and daily matinees for the road show, the contract required the theatre management to provide very specific goods and services:

> ...the Regina Theatre well lighted, cleaned and heated, with all the requisited attaches, both in rear and before the curtain included, necessary stage hands; usual regular orchestra; all licenses; electric light connections on stage; stage furniture; imperishable properties; scenery and equipment (as near in accordance with the plot furnished as possible); house programmes; coupon tickets; all bill posting; billboards; distributing and hanging; and advertise usual squares one week in advance of opening in each issue of local paper, and continue the same throughout the entire engagement; and to receive all baggage, scenery and properties, on the arrival of the company at the stage door, and to carefully carry same to all dressing and property rooms, and stage; and to take the same from dressing, property rooms and stage and deliver outside of stage door immediately after last performance ending such engagement, FREE; also to employ sufficient stage hands to properly handle party of the first part's scenery required for the

performance.[84]

The performing party signing the contract had to provide six vaudeville acts, travel expenses, advance printing, royalties, ten percent of theatre orchestra salaries, picture programs, and forty percent of newspaper advertising. Gross receipts were divided on a forty/sixty split, with management taking sixty percent.[85] If Cutler was indeed signing similar contracts with travelling road shows during 1921 and 1922, it is possible to speculate that the specific conditions of these contracts for live entertainment made film a much more attractive and convenient commodity for the theatre manager to supply his public.

By June 29, 1922, Cutler announced a reduction in the admission prices he had previously raised. Cutler again posted his notice in The Macleod Times, stating that admission would be lowered to 30 cents for adults and 12 1/2 cents for children. Cutler also made a direct appeal to the population of Fort Macleod for an increase in audience size:

> Our policy is to give a good clean show consisting of pictures and musical setting equal to those of many city houses, at popular prices.
>
> As we have a much smaller population to draw from this will only be possible with a largely increased attendance. Please give us your hearty support.[86]

In Our Colourful Past, Jack Cutler, son of manager Fred Cutler, reveals a few more details of typical Empress entertainment in the 1920's:

At the theatre there were frequent Vaudeville or

> Roadshows and Johnny Ryan Sr. played drums for most of them in the pit....In those days the movies changed three times a week -- I believe I saw every one of them, because Granny liked to go....That week in 1924, Dad had The Covered Wagon showing all week--an absolutely unheard-of thing. The show started at 10 a.m. or noon and ran continuously all day, 'til midnight. Sabo, Don and I swept more peanut shells in that theatre those mornings than I am sure have been seen in that town since![87]

In 1926, Fred Cutler began a series of renovations and improvements on the Empress Theatre which would continue for several years. Although little detail is given, a brief announcement in The Macleod Times on August 26, 1926 stated: "F. Cutler, of the Empress Theatre, has had workmen on the job of re-decorating and painting the interior of the building and the local theatre certainly looks fine now."[88] This seems to be the first time that any interior refurbishing had been done since the original decorating of the theatre. It is likely that after fourteen years, the Empress was in need of maintenance, although this fact had never been mentioned in the local papers.

In 1927, T.B. Martin died and passed the ownership of the Empress to his wife, Ruby.[89] By 1928, Ruby had sold the Empress to A.T. Leather. Like Martin, Leather was a prominent businessman in Fort Macleod. Leather was also employed as a real estate broker and had large holdings of property in Fort Macleod and the surrounding area.[90] The Macleod Times announced the sale on September 13, 1928:

> Another large deal in real estate has just been closed, by which A. T. Leather takes over the Empress theatre, with the block of land adjoining. The price is a very

> satisfactory one to both buyer and seller. Mr. Leather has already begun erecting a brick block on the lot adjoining the Empress Theatre, east, which will comprise two stores....[91]

The purchase of the Empress Theatre by A.T. Leather was very obviously one of property speculation, for on October 11, 1928 The Macleod Times again described the sale of the Empress:

> Real estate in Macleod is changing hands quite freely these days, the latest deal being the sale of the Empress Theatre, which was sold a few days ago by A.T. Leather to Booth and Beatie [Beatty] of Indian Head. It is only a few months ago since Mr. Leather bought the theatre from Mrs. T.B. Martin. The new owners have theatres at Indian Head, Lloydminster and Calgary, and a brother of Mr. Beatie owns the theatre at Red Deer, so they control a chain of theatres.[92]

In November of 1928 the new proprietors of the Empress Theatre arrived in Fort Macleod. The Macleod Times described the pair as having "...a wide experience in the movie game, which will doubtless be an asset in their catering to Macleod patrons of the silver screen."[93] It is their experience with movies which is highlighted in this article; there is no mention of their experience in acquiring live entertainment. Indeed, from this point on, the local papers rarely mention live performance at the Empress, except when produced by local amateur companies. Items which were deemed newsworthy from 1928 to 1929, when the first equipment for "talkies" was installed, dealt primarily with improvements at the Empress to accomodate motion pictures.

During 1928 and 1929, then, movies almost completely replaced live entertainment on the Empress stage. The most significant period for live theatrical entertainment at the Empress was drawing to a close. During that time, however, extensive renovations and improvements were undertaken at the Empress Theatre which would significantly alter the appearance of the building.

Shortly after Booth and Beatty arrived in 1928, the new proprietors made several improvements to the interior of the Empress. The Macleod Times described the changes on November 29, 1928:

> Messrs. Booth and Beatty are making many improvements at the Empress Theatre -- new curtains and colored lights giving a pleasing effect in the Lobby. A black sateen draw curtain has been installed at [the] front of the stage, carrying advertisements of local firms -- a big improvement on the old drop curtain. The new orchestra pit curtains are being decorated to harmonize with the stage effects, and the wall decorations in panels will be commenced upon shortly, and when completed the interior of the theatre will present a decorative appearance second to none in the south country. The proprietors state that steadily increasing patronage pleases them greatly and they feel that their efforts are being appreciated by the theatre goers of Macleod and district.[94]

The improvements represent management's desire to keep the Empress up-to-date in order to continue attracting patrons to the theatre. As it had in earlier years, the press began emphasizing how important it was for Fort Macleod to maintain its status as a major centre in the West. There are frequent comments which allude to the Empress Theatre as being the "best" theatre in Southern Alberta, thus giving

Fort Macleod a position of some status, at least in Alberta. On December 20, 1928, The Macleod Times alluded to the status of the Empress.

> The interior wall decorations at the Empress Theatre are now in process of development and when completed will with other improvements now effected make the Macleod Theatre one of the most handsome and attractive amusement places in Southern Alberta.[95]

Of course these comments refer solely to the physical appearance of the Empress, not to the quality of entertainment that was featured there.

It is likely that several improvements at the Empress in the area of film presentation, introduced in March of 1929, significantly contributed to the popularity of film and the decrease of live performance. On March 14, The Macleod Times announced: "The Empress Theatre has just installed a new set of lenses in their projecting machine which are the latest in this line, giving a much clearer and brighter projection on the screen."[96] One week later, the Times again commented on the improvements at the Empress saying: "Messrs. Booth and Beatty, of the Empress Theatre, are investigating the possibility of installing equipment for sound pictures, and are expecting a demonstrator of this new idea in pictures here at an early date."[97] By March 28, Booth and Beatty had installed the first sound equipment at the Empress that provided "...synchronized musical accompaniment for use with all picture presentations."[98]

The partnership of Booth and Beatty was short-lived, for in June of 1929 Beatty sold his interest in the Empress to C.J. Hughes of Neepewa, Manitoba. Hughes had been working as a projectionist at the Empress for some time before the sale.[99] This partnership was responsible for the milestone installation of genuine "talkies" at the Empress Theatre. This technological advancement essentially represents the end of vaudeville and almost all live production at the Empress, except for local live amateur production. Indeed, the decrease in live entertainment at the Empress Theatre reflects the larger picture of the activity taking place in theatres all over North America. In Once Upon A Stage: The Merry World of Vaudeville, Charles and Louise Samuels attribute the demise of vaudeville to both radio and film:

> The death of vaudeville was no sudden thing. The big time really began to get smaller in the early twenties, though neither its kings nor its older headliners and standard acts would admit to this. Among the menacing competitors were movies and a new thing called radio which could be heard at home and cost nothing.[100]

More specifically, however, in describing the demise of E.F. Albee's powerful vaudeville empire, the Samuels suggest that talking pictures were the main cause for the fall, saying: "The final blow came when talking pictures were produced and proved an overwhelming success."[101] In the introduction to The Vaudevillians: A Dictionary of Vaudeville Performers, Anthony Slide describes the same contributing factors to vaudeville's decline: "What killed vaudeville?...Radio was vaudeville's first major enemy....What vaudeville could not fight was the sound motion picture.[102]

Many vaudevillians destroyed their own medium by having their acts filmed. The performer could no longer play the circuits with the acts that had been filmed. In effect, the performer was in competition with himself. Vaudeville acts interjected between films also became obsolete as film improved. Newsreels and short subjects eventually replaced the live acts.[103]

Talking pictures opened at the Empress Theatre on November 14, 1929. Along with this exciting innovation came several other major improvements to the theatre. The Empress was making the plunge into the era of "talkies" with style. The Macleod Times described the latest improvements at the Empress on November 7, 1929:

> Messrs. Booth and Hughes, proprietors of the Empress Theatre at Macleod are making extensive alterations and improvements in the theatre building this week.
>
> A double front is being erected for the purpose of shutting out street noises and to prevent draughts to those occupying back seats.
>
> The theatre is being wired for one of the best "talkie" equipments on the market, which can use both Movietone and Vitaphone products, and the reproduction is guaranteed to be equally as good as the city theatres. The management are also installing two new projection machines which will greatly improve the pictures on the screen. A rotary converter has also been purchased and will be installed, which mean[s] a better and brighter picture.
>
> For the outside a new Neon sign is on order, which will greatly add to the appearance of the theatre.
>
> As silence is essential to the talkies, new matting is being laid on all the floors which will add considerably to the comfort of the patrons.
>
> These improvements are on the biggest scale ever

> made in this theatre and the management are to be congratulated on having faith in Macleod and district to invest the huge sum necessary to make such elaborate improvements. It is hoped that the public will appreciate these efforts and take advantage of having a theatre on a city scale right in their own town and give it their hearty support. The proprietors guarantee showing the best pictures on the market.[104]

Perhaps to attract larger audiences, there is a preoccupation with the idea of the Empress Theatre being up to the standards set in the larger centres. There is a constant sense of competition with other Alberta theatres being emphasized in the papers. Even the installation of the neon sign at the Empress was regarded by the press as a competitive move by management. The Macleod Times highlighted this point on March 27, 1930:

> The new $500.00 Neon Electric Sign installed last week at the Empress Theatre is another step by the proprietors, Messrs. Booth & Hughes, in keeping the Empress abreast of the times regarding equipment as well as productions -- one of the most up-to-date Talkie houses in the province.[105]

Booth and Hughes were apparently quite lavish in their expenditures on improving the Empress Theatre. It is likely that the pair speculated that the new talking pictures would draw a significantly larger audience to the Empress, thus justifying improvements to the interior of the theatre. Audience comfort and overall interior aesthetics were considered essential. On October 23, 1930, The Macleod Times described the new luxurious interior of the Empress:

> The Empress Theatre has been newly decorated throughout. The walls are done in rose pink with panels in gold, and the curtain panels have been effectively re-draped. The lobby has been repainted

> and expensive green plush carpets laid in lobby and aisles. The effect is extremely pleasing, and the management is to be complimented on their initiative in keeping the Macleod Theatre abreast of all the playhouses in Alberta.[106]

These improvements at the Empress were installed at considerable expense to Booth and Hughes, and by 1931, the Empress Theatre, along with many other businesses, began to display the fist signs of financial difficulty. Ronald Clay also reveals that Booth and Hughes probably contributed to the financial stress of the Empress through poor money management. "By some accounts the two men maintained a reputation as being real 'characters' who enjoyed partying and had some difficulty controlling the debts incurred by the business."[107]

Regardless of the financial difficulties that the partners were beginning to experience, or perhaps in an attempt to correct them, in March of 1931 Booth and Hughes acquired the lease to the Highwood Theatre in High River, Alberta.[108] Theatre business in Southern Alberta, however, was hardly thriving in 1931. By May of that same year, the situation at the Empress Theatre was announced to the general public in Fort Macleod. On May 28, The Macleod Gazette reported:

> Owing to the heavy losses on the talking pictures shown on the first three days of the week recently, the management of the Empress Theatre have decided to show on the last three days of the week only. Theatre patrons will regret this change, as Messrs. Booth and Hughes have been giving excellent theatre service to Macleod, and it is hoped that the change will not be of

long duration.[109]

As manager of the Dominion Theatre in Vancouver during 1931, Ivan Ackery describes this drop in theatre patronage as being a typical hurdle for all theatre managers of the early thirties to overcome. He says: "By 1931 it was getting ever more difficult to get patrons into the theatres. The Depression was pressing in on everyone and we had to almost stand on our heads to drum up business."[110]

In 1931, Booth and Hughes alternated as managers of the Empress and of the Highwood. By July of that year, they were optimistic enough to announce their intention to resume a six day run at the Empress.[111] By September 3, 1931, The Macleod Gazette announced:

> With Monday of this week, the management of the Empress theatre has resumed the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday shows. Alf. Booth, who has been managing the Highwood theatre at High River for the past six weeks, returned to Macleod last week, and has resumed the management of the Empress, while Cecil Hughes has returned to the theatre at High River.[112]

In addition to this announcement was the weekly Empress Theatre advertisement featuring a special promotion offered on Mondays called "Gift Night."[113] Theatre managers all over North America were forced to resort to gimmicks in order to draw audiences. In Show Biz: From Vaude to Video, Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr. cite examples of typical promotions in the American theatres:

> Dipping patronage in the first year of depression inspired managers to woo and hold the goodwill of their patrons. One Detroit theatre served free coffee and chewing gum to standees in the lobby holdouts. In

> another, an artist in the lobby free-sketched patrons, while piano acts like Tracy & Duncan entertained.[114]

The Empress offered its patrons several different incentives, from glassware to cash prizes.[115] Variety in promotional features seemed to be important, as management experimented with various gifts. On November 5, 1931, the Empress' weekly advertisement in The Macleod Gazette revealed the details for the latest gimmick:

> Monday night is Ladies' Silverware Night. (This cancels Gift Night). Every lady attending on Monday night will receive free one piece of table silverware. It doesn't matter who buys the tickets -- each lady gets the silver. Be sure to attend the first night so you can start from the beginning and get the full set of 52 pieces....[116]

The advertisement goes on to list all the available pieces in the silverware set, as if to entice the ladies to attend every Monday night.

Just two years after Booth and Hughes installed the first talking pictures at the Empress Theatre, the proprietors announced an upgrading of the disc sound system to sound track. Apparently management was not deterred by the heavy losses incurred with talking pictures of which they had previously complained in May of 1931. It is possible that the disc system was not as popular with audiences as expected, due to problems in the operation of the sound system. With this in mind, Booth and Hughes were likely speculating that the better quality sound track film would attract the audiences they needed in order to stay in operation. The Macleod Gazette describes the new sound equipment in some detail on November 26, 1931:

> New equipment will be installed at the Empress Theatre early next week which will take the place of the disc method which they are using at present. With the new equipment a film will be used which will have the sound track on the side of the film, instead of on a disc similar to a phonograph record which is being used at present and it will be impossible for the sound to be out of time with the picture.
>
> When the needle slips with the disc method, the operator is powerless to correct the error until the reel in which it occurs is finished, and the management has found it advisable to install the more expensive machinery, although at the present time this equipment is seldom found outside of the cities.[117]

In order to install the sound track system, the Empress was closed for three days.[118]

Beginning in January of 1932, the Empress underwent a period of financial difficulty lasting a little more than two years. Ironically, shortly after the installation of sound track talking pictures at the Empress, the theatre was shut down and kept completely silent for approximately eight months. The Macleod Gazette revealed the first news of serious financial difficulty at the Empress on January 7, 1932:

> The news of the assignment of Messrs. Booth & Hughes of the Empress Theatre was received with genuine regret last week, as during their stay here they have operated the theatre in a manner which was a credit to the town. Business depression was, however, too severe to allow them to continue, and the assignment was made on December 22nd, with the British Canadian Trust company of Lethbridge as custodian. The business is being operated under the old management, with Neville Kirk as the representative of the company, and the meeting of creditors at which the future policy will be decided will be held in Lethbridge tomorrow.[119]

One week later, however, The Macleod News announced the sad fact that the Empress (now the only theatre in Fort Macleod) was closing for an indefinite period of time. "The representatives of the creditors of the Empress theatre have decided to close the theatre indefinitely. No future policy is yet decided upon, but if it is re-opened it is unlikely that programs will be shown every night."[120] Show Biz describes similar financial problems experienced by the film industry in general all over North America:

> If 1930 was bad for Hollywood, 1931 was terrible. The boxoffice [sic], crippled by the depression, was hit equally hard by public charges that the films being made were lemons, and the stars grossly overpaid. Film attendance dropped 40 per cent, forcing cuts in studio and theatre overhead. Bankers, previously lenient with the industry, began to demand more concrete collateral for loans -- and the only collateral producers could offer was the diminishing interest of the public in films....
>
> As bad as 1931 was for Hollywood -- with West Coast sages predicting that things cold not possibly get worse -- 1932 set an all-time low for the film industry.[121]

Indeed, 1932 was in all likelihood the worst year for the Empress in its entire history. Throughout 1932, The Macleod Gazette closely followed the story of the Empress Theatre. In March of that year, disputes over the bankruptcy of the Empress were heard first informally by Mr. Justice Tweedie in Lethbridge;[122] then formally in bankruptcy court by the same judge.[123] On May 19, The Macleod Gazette reported the court's decision to dismiss the actions against the Empress and its trustees, The British Canadian Trust

Company. This decision allowed the trust company the freedom to sell, lease, or re-open the theatre.[124]

It was not until September of 1932 that the Empress was finally re-opened. By this time, the trust company had sold the Empress to A.T. Leather, the same real estate agent who previously owned the theatre in 1928. On August 25, The Macleod Gazette printed details regarding the recent events:

> Messrs. R. A. Clement, proprietor of the Rexall Drug Store here and Dan Boyle, proprietor of the Starland theatre at Granum, have rented the Empress Theatre here from A.T. Leather, and are arranging for the re-opening to take place on September 1st. The opening picture will be "Shanghai Express" which is announced elsewhere in this paper.
>
> Mr. Leather, who is a previous owner of the theatre, recently purchased the property from the British Canadian Trust Company, the trustees for the bankrupt estate of Messrs. Booth and Hughes. The theatre has been closed since early in January, and it is with considerable pleasure that local theatregoers have heard of the decision to re-open the premises.[125]

This news may have been exciting for the theatre patrons in Fort Macleod; however, The Macleod Gazette reported even bigger news on October 20, 1932. "The Appeal of Clarence L. Dowsley of Calgary against a judgement of the Alberta courts in connection with the Empress theatre here, was heard by the Supreme Court of Canada last Thursday, and judgement was reserved."[126] In the Lethbridge bankruptcy court, Dowsley had brought a suit against the British Canadian Trust Company and was seeking damages of $7,000.[127] Dowsley had apparently been hired by Booth and Hughes before the assignment to act as an operator for the Empress. He had based his suit against the trustees on an alleged illegal termination of employment and, after losing the case in the Alberta court, he subsequently appealed to the Supreme Court.[128] On February 23, 1933, The Macleod Gazette reported the outcome of the case. "The appeal of C.L. Dowsley of Calgary against the decision of the Alberta courts in his claim for damages against the British Canadian Trust company, has been dismissed with costs by the Supreme Court of Canada."[129]

This decision finally released the Empress Theatre from the courts. The theatre had been back in operation as of September 1932; however, during the time of the Supreme Court hearings, management decided to keep the theatre dark the first three nights of each week during the months of January and February of 1933. The decision was made in an attempt to reduce operating expenses.[130] According to advertisements appearing in The Macleod Gazette the theatre did reinstate the weekly program of movies featured six nights per week by March of 1933.[131]

Throughout 1933, the most newsworthy events occurring at the Empress Theatre were amateur concerts and plays that were staged by the locals. According to the press, these shows were well attended and there does not appear to be any complaint from management regarding audience size.

The Macleod Gazette announced the next change in Empress mangement on August 23, 1934:

> A.T. Leather has leased the Empress Theatre to Messrs. Alf Booth and R. L. Holm, the new management to take possession on September 3rd. Mr. Booth was formerly of the firm of Booth and Hughes, who operated the theatre until January of 1932, and his many friends will be pleased to learn that he is to be again associated with the theatre. Mr. Holm is an experienced operator who has been associated with the theatres at Stettler and Red Deer.[132]

It is somewhat surprising that the same Booth who claimed bankruptcy in January of 1932 should once again be managing the Empress Theatre. It appears that Booth did not learn from his first mistakes, for even after all the financial difficulty the Empress had previously experienced due to the purchase of new equipment, Booth almost immediately announced the installation of more new equipment for the Empress Theatre. It is assumed that Booth did not purchase this new equipment from the Canadian Orchestraphones, as this was the company that had, in March of 1932, filed a claim in bankruptcy court for the payment of the purchase price of the projection machine at the Empress. Regardless of the previous financial crisis, Booth and Holm went ahead with their plans. On September 13, 1934, _The Macleod Gazette_ once again described the latest improvements at the Empress:

> Improvements which have been made at the Empress Theatre during the past week include[s] the installation of a new amplifier in the projection room, a new loud speaker, and a new screen. With these installations, both the vision and the sound have been improved, and the showings in this theatre will now be second to none.[133]

Regardless of the installation of better sound equipment, it was only the live amateur productions that received any significant attention in the newspapers during the winter of 1934/35.

In the spring of 1935 the Empress once again suffered a financial loss. On May 2, The Macleod Gazette gave a detailed account of a burglary at the theatre:

> A burglary of the office of the Empress Theatre was reported on Tuesday, when it was discovered that at some time during the night someone had raised the window facing the street, crawled through into the office, ransacked the drawers in the desk, broke open a cabinet door, and stolen about twenty dollars in small change. The door receipts for Monday evening's show were not in the theatre, and therefore the amount realized by the theives was not as large as they probably had expected.[134]

This was the second time in the history of the Empress that the theatre had been robbed.

The partnership of Booth and Holm appears to have operated without any major difficulties during the next two years. In September of 1936, however, the partnership was dissolved, with R. Holm buying out Booth's share.[135]

In January of 1937, the Empress Theatre was sold once again, thus instigating the period of the theatre's greatest success as a movie house. On January 14, 1937, The Macleod Gazette introduced the residents of Fort Macleod to the latest and eventually perhaps the most successful manager/owner of the Empress Theatre:

> A deal was announced recently whereby the Empress Theatre was sold early this month by A.T. Leather to Dan Boyle of Granum. Mr. Boyle has operated the theatre in Granum for a number of years, and we understand that in the not distant future he intends to

> move to Macleod and to personally manage the theatre here.[136]

By May of that same year, Boyle personally took over the management of the theatre with the promise that he would "...continue to give to the public of this district the same splendid service that they have received in the past."[137] Boyle was obviously a man of some experience in theatre management, as he had managed the Starland Theatre in Granum for eighteen years before purchasing the Empress Theatre.[138] The Empress Theatre, on the other hand, had had nine changes in management over the eighteen years prior to 1937.

By 1938, Boyle began implementing changes at the Empress by revising the programming and making major renovations to the theatre. Ronald Clay describes these changes in some detail:

> Movies changed three times a week and ran six nights a week with two performances per night. Renovations and additions were made to the structure of the theater itself including closing the arched exterior vestibule with glass panels and french doors. The entrance was thus brought out to the street creating a lobby space which was given a fresh coat of paint and kalsomine. The entrance thus allowed patrons, in the event of a lineup, to wait in comfort in the enlarged lobby. Within the new enclosure, washrooms and a concession were added, the projection room was moved directly upstairs, the heating system was changed to steam and the use of unique double seats allowed for a staggered seating arrangement and improved sight lines for each audience member. Imitation window covers reflecting the door arches were installed, air conditioning grills were added, the orchestra pit was removed and a curved stage front and stairs leading up either side of the stage were installed. Decorative neon lites [sic] were installed on the ceiling in the form of one large tulip and two smaller ones all in pink and green. Some of the old tiffany style lamps were relocated and new velvet curtains, made by Mrs. Edna Boyle, adorned the

> alcoves. A new 100 seat balcony was added to accommodate the increased patronage....[139]

These changes at the Empress mark the beginning of a great period of stability for the theatre, particularly as a movie house. Several of the renovations, such as the enclosure of the orchestra pit and the installation of a concession area, were clearly intended to improve the Empress specifically as a movie theatre. Clay writes: "Under Boyle's management the theater was to realize its most profitable period as a movie theater.... Boyle was to own and operate the theater for 26 years....[140] Boyle's influence was felt beyond his twenty-six year term, as many of his renovations at the Empress still exist up to the present day.

By 1937, at the time of Boyle's purchase of the theatre, the era of live theatrical entertainment at the Empress was almost completely over. The dissolution of live entertainment at the Empress closely followed a similar pattern of decline in theatres all over North America, as film technology improved, radio was popularized, and the "talkies" were introduced. During the late 1920's and early 1930's, live entertainment was phased out of existence, except for the occasional amateur productions staged by local performers. Rise Massey writes in 1981:

> While the Empress is now used almost exclusively as a movie theatre, it has in the past played an important role in the cultural life of Fort Macleod. In addition to the travelling troops [sic] of entertainers, community dramatic groups staged productions there

until it was taken over by the Boyles in 1937.[141]
The year 1937 then, represents a turning point for the Empress Theatre as it entered a lengthy period of stability and success that was strongly based upon film as the major entertainment medium.

## Notes

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[5] Our Colourful Past 32.

[6] Our Colourful Past 340.

[7] Our Colourful Past 32.

[8] Our Colourful Past 317.

[9] Our Colourful Past 317.

[10] Macleod Advertiser, Dec. 28, 1911, N. pag.

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[13] Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism and the Fort Macleod Provincial Historic Area Society, A Walking/Driving Tour of Fort Macleod's Historic Downtown & Residential Area (N.p.: n.p.) 34-35.

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[16] Macleod Advertiser, May 16, 1912, 8.

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[28] Macleod Spectator, Dec. 31, 1912, 1.

[29] Macleod Advertiser, May 29, 1913, 8.

[30] Macleod Spectator, Oct. 23, 1913, 5.

[31] Clay 3.

[32] Massey 3.

[33] Macleod Spectator, Nov. 13, 1913, 8.

[34] Macleod Spectator, May 28, 1914, 3.

[35] Macleod Spectator, July 9, 1914, 5.

[36] Macleod Spectator, Aug. 6, 1914, 1.

[37] Macleod Spectator, Dec. 31, 1914, 4.

[38] Macleod Spectator, Jan. 21, 1915, 4.

[39] Macleod Spectator, Jan. 21, 1915, 1.

[40] Macleod Spectator, May 20, 1915, 4.

[41] Macleod Spectator, Aug. 19, 1915, 1.

[42] Macleod Spectator, Oct. 14, 1915, 1.

[43] Macleod Spectator, Nov. 4, 1915, 1.

[44] Macleod Spectator, Nov. 4, 1915, 1.

[45] Macleod Spectator, Nov. 4, 1915, 3.

[46] Macleod Spectator, Feb. 24, 1916, 1.

[47] Macleod Spectator, Mar. 23, 1916, 1.

[48] Macleod Spectator, May 25, 1916, 1.

[49] Macleod Spectator, May 25, 1916, 1.

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[51] Macleod Spectator, July 6, 1916, 1.

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[140] Clay 9.

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# Chapter Three

## The Empress Theatre: Performers and Performances

Before the Empress Theatre was built in 1912, the residents of Fort Macleod had already enjoyed both amateur and professional live entertainment in such venues as the recreation room at the old fort barracks or the main floor of the town hall. It appears, however, that these productions were featured in a rather sporadic fashion, without a regular schedule. Most of the amateur theatricals, for example, played for one night only and were mainly produced during the winter months. Professional touring groups played anywhere from one to three nights, but with no noticeable regularity. In the late nineteenth century, for example, theatrical entertainment occurred more often during the winter months. Later, when touring companies were featured at Town Hall, performances of one company were announced for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of one week while the next company performed Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of another week. Other companies played for only one night. The nature of circuit travel demanded that shows be held when the company was in town, no matter what day of the week. Interested theatre patrons had to watch closely the local papers for notification of an evening's entertainment. The "photo play" theatres that were built in Fort Macleod around 1910 brought about the first regular entertainment in the town, as advertisements indicate they were open every evening with continuous performances.[1] Live entertainment, limited to vaudeville acts, was introduced at the Lyric Theatre, but it was only featured "from time to time."[2] The Empress Theatre building, however, finally provided a permanent and suitable space for regular performance in the town of Fort Macleod. As The Macleod Advertiser stated in 1912: "Macleod needs a new theatre. She is going to have it."[3]

Upon inspection of the newly built Empress Theatre, a writer from The Macleod Spectator revealed a few details regarding the suitability of the Empress for live entertainment as well as the intention of management to provide live shows on a regular basis. "The arrangements of the stage are perfect. Mr. McRae has installed fine dressing rooms, and steam heating, and will put on good plays when the good plays come around, so that his patrons can have a change of menu."[4]

Unfortunately, the local papers did not advertise or review the opening night feature at the Empress Theatre. Although it is not known whether the show consisted of a live performance or a film, it is likely that film was the main feature on the opening night. It is also possible that opening night featured a combination of the two forms of entertainment. On July 4, 1912, The Macleod Advertisor announced that the theatre was opened for inspection on the previous Saturday night, but there was no mention of any specific type of show being featured for the evening.[5] However, later in the same column of news briefs, the paper advised: "Don't miss the big special show at the Empress Theatre Friday afternoon and evening. You'll enjoy every minute spent there."[6] Unfortunately, the following week's edition of The Macleod Advertisor did not review the special show at the Empress; however, it did mention a different performance with reference to the Empress:

> "The Texas Ranger," a production of the real "mellerdramer" type was given at the Town Hall last night before a so-so house. On account of its being misrepresented to the management and the scenery being too small for the stage, the Empress Theatre refused to put on the piece.[7]

It is obvious from this account that the Empress Theatre management was concerned about the image that the theatre would portray, particularly with regard to the first shows that were presented there. The papers throughout 1912 also reveal that the Town Hall continued as the dominant venue for live entertainment throughout most of that year.

The Macleod Spectator makes it clear that film was scheduled to be shown at the Empress at least by August of 1912. The same article also discloses the first indication of a relationship between the Empress Theatre and the Lyric Theatre. On August 27, 1912, The Macleod Spectator commented:

> The Lyric "movie" on Monday night couldn't take its patrons in when the evening show was due to start and returned the money, and on Tuesday night the big

> Empress was in the same fix, but both shows got a start later on. Funny, eh?[8]

According to the papers, it is unclear when the first live show was brought to the Empress stage. As late as August 22, 1912, The Macleod Advertisor announced that the Butler Stock Company would play a one week engagement in the Town Hall and that there were "...plans laid out to make the hall more attractive during their stay.[9] This comment seems to indicate that the Empress either was not ready for live production, or was more determined to establish itself as a movie house before bringing in live acts. It is also possible that the Empress was not yet in full operation by August of 1912, as there are no apparent advertisements in The Macleod Advertisor or The Macleod Spectator. If the Empress was already in full operation, it is unusual that the local papers did not devote any significant space to previews or reviews of either films or live entertainment.

The performance of Paul Gilmore and his company in October of 1912 appears to be the first live theatrical performance at the Empress that was noted by the press. An advertisement in The Macleod Advertiser promised that the play "The Havoc" had played "419 performances in New York City"[10] and that it was complete with "magnificent scenery and electrical effects."[11] It is very likely that Paul Gilmore and company were considered a major attraction for the Empress Theatre as they were featured at theatres such as the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg, the Sherman Grand in Calgary, the Empire Theatre in Edmonton, the Lyric in Red Deer, and the Majestic in Lethbridge.

Gilmore's company had appeared at the Walker Theatre on September 12, 1912. The Manitoba Free Press reviewed the performance:

> Those at the Walker last night who saw Paul Gilmore for the first time are to be congratulated on making his acquaintance when at his best. There were no scenic effects to distract the attention, and the entire company in "The Havoc" was composed of four people....The little company well supports Mr. Gilmore.[12]

The reviewer writing for The Macleod Advertisor on October 17 commented on the large audience at the Empress and also praised Paul Gilmore. However, he did not agree about the supporting cast, saying: "He [Paul Gilmore] is undoubtedly the best actor that has appeared in Macleod for some time. The other members of the troupe, however, showed only very ordinary ability."[13] The Lethbridge Daily Herald also reviewed Gilmore and his company after their Lethbridge appearance on October 26, 1912. This review also noted that a large audience was present and described the company as a "...quartette of creditable players headed by Paul Gilmore...".[14] Although the house was filled for the performance at the Grand Theatre in Calgary on October 28, the reviewer for The Calgary Herald described the show in less than glowing terms:

> Apart from Mr. Gilmore as Richard Craig the performance was a disappointment. The performance, except in

> spots, was flat and uninteresting. The scenery was also very second rate, not at all up to the style of the mounting expected at such a theatre as the Grand.[15]

The general consensus of the reviews gave credit to Paul Gilmore, yet there was some disagreement over the supporting cast. As possibly the opening live production at the Empress in Fort Macleod, it appears that the show was satisfactory from the perspective of the audience as they demonstrated their appreciation with "unstinted applause".[16]

A much larger company was to appear at the Empress Theatre on November 21, 1912. The Macleod Advertisor carried an advertisement for The Imperial English Musical Company which promised that the company of ten would provide a pleasant and enjoyable evening of entertainment.[17] A review appearing in The Lethbridge Daily Herald on November 20, 1912, indicated that the company had indeed provided an enjoyable evening for the patrons of the Morris Theatre in Lethbridge:

> There was nearly a full house last night to greet the English Imperial Hand Bell Ringers, and judging by the applause accorded them, everyone was satisfied with the performance given. The company consists of nine musicians and vocalists, for, apart from the program of hand bell ringing, there were some pretty good songs rendered.[18]

Although Lethbridge theatre patrons may have been satisfied with the performance, according to the reviewer for The Macleod Advertiser, the performance of the same company at the Empress in Fort Macleod was a marked disappointment:

> The performance of the Imperial Bell Ringers at the Empress theatre last Thursday evening was a mediocre

> affair. A melancholy visaged individual who rejoiced in the singularly inappropriate name of Giggle, led this aggravation. Several very ordinary vocalists and instrumental players paced out the programme and "London's Renowned Comedian" was introduced apparently for the purpose of showing how easily London could be amused. Of course "Il Travatore" was tortured in tinpanny horrors as a finale.[19]

It is obvious that the reviewer for The Macleod Advertiser was not reluctant to make negative statements about the entertainment at the Empress. The appearance of negative reviews helps to establish a measure of credibility for the reviewer, as it allows that some independent opinions were being formulated based upon specific performances rather than on the previous success of the company in the larger centres. Chesley Skinner writes that the tendency of nineteenth century reviewers in a small prairie town such as Lethbridge may have been to avoid any negative criticism of a show that had been popular in the East:

> The editor often cautioned people that the companies were highly regarded in other cities and in order to ensure their return it was imperative that they get audiences. The "Best in the West" often accompanied the announcement of the performance, and reports after the fact approached the events with reverence, never deeming to offer criticism about something which had been a critical success and labeled as professional in the cities back East.[20]

It is likely that early reviewer/writers for the Fort Macleod papers shared the same tendencies as those in Lethbridge; however, by the time the Empress Theatre was featuring live theatrical entertainment, it appears that the reviewers were gaining enough confidence to offer their own opinions.

On December 26, 1912, The Macleod Advertiser commented on what was possibly a local, amateur vaudeville production. In fact, it is possible that this was the first amateur production featured on the Empress stage; however, the review does not establish for certain whether the show was performed by locals or a touring group:

> A big crowd enjoyed the vaudeville show given at the Empress theatre on Monday night. There was something doing all the time and "Manager McCrea's Venture" was a decided success. The company cut out the "classical" and went in for the "human interest" features. The acrobatic and juggling stunts were remarkably good and the antics of Harry, Lenton, the funny Hoosier Boy, would have made a graven image smile. The show was interspersed with some excellent films.[21]

The mixture of film and vaudeville represents the beginning of an era whereby two genres of entertainment were effectively presented together for an evening's entertainment. The Empress Theatre would have been well suited for the combination of film and live acts because it was originally designed to accomodate both forms of entertainment. Thus, the Empress had a fourteen by twenty-two foot stage as well as a large lantern room for the film machinery.

In the early part of 1913, most comments about the Empress Theatre in the local press tended to deal with film presentations. On April 10, 1913, the public of Fort Macleod had the opportunity to hear R.B. Bennett, K.C., M.P., speak at the Empress Theatre.[22] That same month, the first "patriotic" films appeared at the Empress, as early indicators of unrest in pre-war Europe. The film was titled, "Our Empire Navy", and was billed as "the finest pictorial representation of the greatest topic of the hour."[23] On May 29, 1913, The Macleod Advertisor announced what seems to have been the first benefit performance at the Empress, apparently on behalf of the Women's Hospital Aid.[24]

On October 23, 1913, an advertisement for the Hallowell Concert Company appeared in The Macleod Spectator, making the very general comment that the company was made up of "...renowned musicians, every one of whom is an artist...."[25] The same company appeared at the Empress Theatre in Lethbridge on October 31, 1913, and a picture appearing in The Lethbridge Daily Herald on that same day reveals that the company was comprised of nine musicians and that they had originated out of Chicago.[26] A promotional piece appearing in the Lethbridge Daily Herald on October 22, revealed a few more details about the concert company:

> In presenting the Hallowell Concert Co. to the public, the Order of Moose wishes to announce that this orchestra ranks on a level with the finest concert companies, each individual being a schooled musician, of whom part of them are graduates of some of the best musical schools in the East, and have played in some of the finest bands and orchestras of the United States which places them in a position to render the best of music. Confirm this by seeing and hearing for yourself. Standard overtures, characteristic and descriptive music, popular and standard selections. Fine solos, played by renowned artists. Something to please everyone.[27]

In Fort Macleod, the Hallowell Concert Co. performed under the auspices of the Macleod Fire Brigade. The show was apparently not reviewed by either the Fort Macleod or Lethbridge papers.

The next show to appear at the Empress Theatre brought about a significant change to the physical structure of the stage. On October 23, 1913, The Macleod Spectator carried a large advertisement complete with photographs promoting "The Beggar Prince", and calling it "...the ever-joyous comic opera in three acts...."[28] The feature advertisement also announced that the "...Empress stage will be deepened, and Macleod will have a real theatre, with a good stage, inclined floor, and opera chairs. Every seat will give the occupant a chance to see without taking all the rubber out of his neck."[29] The show was evidently large enough to warrant the alterations to the stage; however, The Macleod Spectator failed to reveal the name or the size of the company. Another advertisement appearing in The Lethbridge Daily Herald on October 30, 1913, revealed that it was The Boston Opera Company playing "The Beggar Prince" and that the company was made up of "twenty talented artists".[30] A preview appearing in the paper on the same day gave a few more details about the company:

> The approaching engagement of the famous Boston Opera Co., at the Sherman Theatre, for two nights commencing Friday, October 31, promises to be the social event of the season....There is a chorus of beautiful girls, who sing sweetly and dance beautifully, and are a strong feature of the company....
>
> There are twenty song numbers during the three

> acts of the opera. Mr. Jack Leslie, the principal comedian, was for a number of years with the Whitneys, one of broadway's shining lights; while each and every member among the principals were more or less connected with most of the recent New York offerings.[31]

By November 11, 1913, the Empress Theatre was to feature another opera company of at least 20 members.[32] This time, it was Pollard's Australian Juvenile Opera Company which was to present "The Last Waltz" on the Empress stage. The advertisement in The Macleod Spectator billed the show as "...one of the very best examples of modern comic opera, combining beautiful music with bright comedy and a dramatic interest which is worthy of special note."[33] The Pollards also played the Majestic Theatre in Lethbridge for two days following their Fort Macleod performance. In Lethbridge the company performed "The Last Waltz" on the first night and "The Mikado" on the second. The advertisement in The Lethbridge Daily Herald warned the public that this performance would be the "...last chance of seeing the popular Pollards before their return to Australia."[34] According to a preview in the same edition of the paper, the Pollards were well-known around the world, as they had travelled extensively in many countries, including South Africa.[35] In May of 1914, The Calgary Herald gave a history of the company, revealing that they had left Australia in 1899, toured India and South Africa, returned to Australia to recruit more juveniles, and began another world tour. They arrived in Canada in 1908 and had been playing from coast to coast ever since.[36] An article appearing in The Edmonton Bulletin on November 29, 1913, however, indicated that the Pollards were not returning to Australia, but had been secured by the Pantages vaudeville circuit for a tour beginning in Edmonton:

> In the securing of the Pollard Opera Co. for a tour of the Pantages circuit, the agents of Mr. Pantages have scored another scoop, for many of the leading agencies who book vaudeville acts were after the famous troupe of juveniles....The personnel of the act includes all the clever Pollard principals who have appeared with success under the Pollard banner for the past few years....[37]

The appearance of the Pollards on the Empress stage preceded their decision to travel with the Pantages circuit. A brief comment on their Fort Macleod performance was included in The Macleod Spectator on November 13, 1913:

> "The Last Waltz", by the Pollard's Australian Juvenile Opera Co. which was given at the Empress Theatre on Tuesday evening last, was a splendid exhibition of good acting and singing on the part of this noted company, and the words of praise which had preceded their visit were fully realized.[38]

In 1914, the Empress Theatre featured several shows which played other major Alberta theatres and probably toured extensively in all three prairie provinces. On January 8, 1914, The Macleod Spectator announced with an advertisement and preview that "Bunty Pulls the Strings", starring Dawsey McNaughton, was coming to Fort Macleod: "At last 'Bunty' is coming to Macleod. She has succeeded in setting London, New York, and Chicago, and the Canadian Provinces topsy-turvy with 'Buntyitis' and will spread the fever to Macleod...."[39] The preview goes on to outline the plot of the play, but reveals few details about the company. Fortunately, The Lethbridge Daily Herald released more information about the company as a promotion before the Lethbridge performance on January 19, 1914:

> "Bunty Pulls the Strings", that wonderfully successful comedy which comes to the Majestic on Monday, Jan. 19, will be given by a company of Scotch [sic] players organized especially for the coming production, and selected by Graham Moffat, the author. This was made necessary because neither the London nor New York companies have approached the limit of their initial run....
>
> The company, which was rehearsed in London directly under the direction of Mr. Moffat comprises some of the best known stars in the English and Scotch capitals, and the principals are assisted by a company of thirty Scotch players who give a home like flavor to the play and its surroundings.[40]

The Empress Theatre most certainly made use of its recent enlargement of the stage in order to accommodate this cast of over thirty members. The reaction of the audience in both Lethbridge and Fort Macleod to the show was overwhelmingly positive. The Lethbridge Daily Herald stated that "...judging by the evident enjoyment of the large crowd, something different pleased their fancy"[41], while The Macleod Spectator observed that the show "...was played before a crowded house who were loud in their praise of this most fascinating play."[42]

The first mention of vaudeville at the Empress Theatre was an engagement booked in conjunction with the "Sullivan and Considine Empress Circuit." The show was advertised to play just three days after "Bunty" had been performed on the Empress stage. A preview for the vaudeville show was reprinted in The Macleod Spectator from The Medicine Hat News:

> The "Webber Family" society acrobats comprise the act in question and their work is something which is at once talented, graceful and very popular. The six young men and women who comprise the troupe seem to have tendons of steel and muscles of gutta percha, so quickly and skillfully do they perform their difficult pyramid feats and aerial leaps and balancing stunts.[43]

Of course the troupe was accompanied by several other acts including singers, dancers, comedians and contortionists. It is likely that the extra ten feet on the Empress stage was fully utilized by acrobatic acts such as the Webber Family. On January 22, 1914, The Macleod Spectator mentioned the audience response to the vaudeville: "On Tuesday a great vaudeville treat was given and those people who were present were unanimous in their appreciation of the various acts."[44]

On February 5, 1914, another large touring company appeared at the Empress Theatre and performed "The Glad Eye" for the Fort Macleod audience. According to an advertisement in The Lethbridge Daily Herald, the show was being toured by the "All British Company" with a cast of twenty people. The same advertisment also stated that the show was an exact replica of what was used in London and that it was coming "...direct from fifteen months at the Apollo, Globe, [and] Strand Theatres, London."[45] The same show had played for one week at the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg in January of 1914. The review in the Manitoba Free Press described the audience response to "The Glad Eye":

> And yet last night's large audience laughed and laughed long and heartily....
>
> The cast is well balanced without any vivid exceptions, good or bad, and the scenery depicting two rooms of the same house quite adequate.[46]

The show was also well received at the Sherman Grand Theatre in Calgary, when it played there at the end of January. The Calgary Daily Herald described the French farce by the English company as

> ... a sure cure for the "blues," and an evening spent witnessing this play is an evening well spent for those who wish to forget the humdrum details of everyday life and business cares.
>
> The play last night was greeted by a fairly large audience for an opening night, and those present seemed thoroughly to enjoy the peculiar situations....[47]

It is likely that with its record of popular success, "The Glad Eye" was well received in Fort Macleod.

On February 10, 1914, the United Play Company Incorporated presented "Graustark" on the Empress stage. The preview in The Macleod Spectator does not describe the company in any detail except to say that they had paid particular attention to scenic equipment. A photograph depicting a scene from "Graustark" revealed that there were at least twelve actors in the company.[48] Although there is no review of "Graustark" at the Empress, The Lethbridge Daily Herald reviewed the show after the performance at the

Majestic Theatre on February 9, 1914:

> The play "Graustark," presented at the Majestic last night was rather second rate and certainly was not worth $1.50 a seat. The play has a rather pretty plot, and one or two of the caste [sic] were fairly good, but beyond that, there was nothing to go into ecstasies over. The staging was not as elaborate as one would expect; in fact,it came far from harmonizing with the subject matter of the drama.[49]

On February 5, 1914, The Macleod Spectator announced that "The Rosary" was returing to Fort Macleod. According to the brief description, the play had been a great success in Fort Macleod on a prior engagement.[50] An advertisemnt which appeared in the same paper the following week promised that the show would be complete with "gorgeous electrical effects" and described the show as a success in New York, Chicago, and Boston.[51] "The Rosary" played the Empress Theatre in Red Deer on January 1, 1914,[52] and the Majestic Theatre in Lethbridge on February 13,[53] prior to its performance at the Empress in Fort Macleod on February 16. The Calgary Herald revealed that the show had toured the west coast prior to a three-day run at the Grand Theatre in Calgary.[54] The Calgary engagement was immediately followed by another three-day engagement at the Empire in Edmonton.[55] A review of the Lethbridge performance appeared in The Lethbridge Daily Herald on February 14, 1914:

> A splendid show and a poor house is the report in a nutshell of the doings at the Majestic last night. It was "The Rosary", a show which made a hit here a year ago, and which was greeted by few last night. The show has lost none of its qualities. What was nice about it a year ago is still to the good and the company are deserving of considerably more practical appreciation

> than was shown last night....The whole setting of the play is charming and those who enjoy a pleasing drama should make it a point to see "The Rosary"....[56]

During February of 1914 the Empress Theatre featured two more live theatrical productions. On February 24 and 25, Sullivan and Considine Vaudeville played the Empress. In Once Upon a Stage: The Merry World of Vaudeville, Charles and Louise Samuels comment upon the reputation of the Sullivan and Considine Circuit: "Considine is said never to have forgotten a friend or a favor, and a contract with his circuit was the only one you could borrow money on. Considine never cancelled an act."[57]

The quality of the Sullivan and Considine Vaudeville obviously pleased the Empress Theatre audience. On February 26, 1914, The Macleod Spectator described the show as a hit:

> Good crowds were present at the Empress Theatre on Tuesday and yesterday to hear the Sullivan and Considine Vaudeville acts, and on both occasions excellent performances of a high-class order were witnessed.
>
> The acting, singing, and dancing of the various artists engaged was equal to any that has been seen in the town for some time and the singing of the popular song "Swaying" made a great hit. Three-Hand Brothers, the novelty equilibrists also put on some fine stunts in the acrobatic line, and judging from the applause with which their various exhibitions were greeted, the audience were [sic] highly pleased at the turn.[58]

The Sullivan and Considine Vaudeville was immediately followed by the popular Tom Marks and company, who played a repertoire of three plays at the Empress on February 27 and 28, 1914. A press release in The Macleod Spectator promoted the upcoming engagement:

> How often have you heard the expression, "Oh, it takes Tom Marks' company to pack the theatre in this town," and how often have you seen this statement verified? The reason for this expression is very simple. In the first place, a company headed by Tom Marks is a safe guarantee that the public will get their money's worth in real enjoyment, and in the second place, the Tom Marks' Company is the most reliable Stock Company on the road toady. Mr. Marks has spent a vast amount of time, undivided attention, forethought and expenditure in making a complete study of what pleases his patrons most, and when this sterling actor and his company appear at the Empress next Friday and Saturday nights, the public will say they are better than ever.[59]

Tom Marks played the Empress Theatre in Red Deer on January 26 and 27, 1914. A promotional piece in the Red Deer Advocate stated that the company would be supported by "an elaborate display of scenery and electric effects."[60]

Although the Fort Macleod papers did not review Tom Marks, it is likely that his shows at the Empress were very well received. The company appeared in Lethbridge at the Sherman Theatre the week following the Fort Macleod engagement and a review appearing in The Lethbridge Daily Herald indicated that the show was sold out for the week: "The Sherman Theatre was again taxed to capacity last evening, and from the many complimentary remarks passed by the patrons, it is safe to predict the S.R.O. sign being hung out for the rest of the week."[61] In Fallen Empires: Lost Theatres of Edmonton 1881-1914, John Orrell notes a promotional trick called a "potato matinee" used by Tom Marks for a performance at Ross Hall in South Edmonton in 1908.[62] Marks employed a different promotional gimmick at one of his Lethbridge performances in March of 1914:

> An interesting feature of the advertising end is that Mr. Marks offered $50.00 to the couple that would be married on the stage tonight after the performance, and the Herald has it on good authority that a marriage will take place, a couple whose names are withheld have decided to take the final step.[63]

The Oliver Eckhardt Co. presented "A Woman's Way" on the Empress stage on Tuesday, April 7, 1914.[64] A review in The Lethbridge Daily Herald for a performance at the Sherman Theatre on April 2 revealed that the company was comprised of four players and that the show was "well worth the price of admission."[65] "The Third Degree" by Charles Klein also appeared at the Empress in April of 1914; however, the Fort Macleod newspapers did not reveal any details about the performance.[66]

During April of 1914 the Empress Theatre featured a considerable amount of live theatrical entertainment. In addition to the professional touring companies that appeared at the Empress that month, there were two performances by local amateur groups. This amateur activity was apparently viewed to be of significant interest to the residents of Fort Macleod, as the local media devoted much more attention to the promotion of these shows than to any of the professional shows. As early as February 12, 1914, The Macleod Spectator revealed the first details about the upcoming performance:

> On various occasions in the past amateur dramatic entertainments of a really first-class nature have been presented in Macleod, and it is a pleasure to announce

> that one of a similar kind is on the tapis for Easter Monday, in the Empress. Confidentially, it may be mentioned that it proposed to present two one-act farces with a vaudeville in between. One of these farces selected being "Ici en Parle Français," and if you have never seen it, be very careful not to overlook this opportunity. The old original Dramatic Society have the matter in hand and will be able to announce full particulars and casts later.[67]

One week before the performance, The Macleod Spectator announced that the show would be performed under the auspices of the Macleod Cricket Club and that the other farce was titled "A Regular Fix." The same article also promised:

> Between the acts a high class vaudeville entertainment will be given including an old fashioned Spelling Bee, which will be participated in by prominent citizens of the town, divided into teams and captained by J.W. McDonald and A.H. Allen.[68]

The evening obviously promised something for everyone, with the inclusion of some friendly competition in the form of the Spelling Bee. It was to be a performance involving many members of the Fort Macleod community, especially those more prominent members of the town.

On the day of the performance, The Macleod Spectator printed one last reminder for the performance with the comment that the show would "no doubt attract a large audience."[69] This prediction was evidently accurate, as the review in The Macleod Spectator on April 23, 1914, was headlined: "Amateurs Score Big Success." The paper devoted significantly more space to the review of this amateur performance than to any reviews of the professional companies that had appeared at the Empress:

> The entertainment given at the Empress Theatre last Thursday evening under the auspices of the Macleod Cricket Club, was a brilliant success in every respect. The two one-act farces, "A Regular Fix," and "Ici en Parle Français," were splendidly presented by the Macleod Dramatic Society....
>
> Mr. Heap gave a very good impersonation of the half-tipsy De Brass, while Mr. P.F. Kortright, as Mr. Surplus, a lawyer, to whom De Brass proceeded to tell his troubles, was the choleric, fussy old lawyer to perfection. His make-up could not have been surpassed....
>
> The players were warmly applauded as the curtain fell on the final scene.[70]

The reviewer went on to describe the Spelling Bee in some detail, cleverly using the words that the players failed to spell to describe their subsequent defeat:

> "Shillalah" was the club that knocked L.S. Grove off the platform, while Dr. Bruce got a "welt," that sent him spinning. Mrs. E. Forster Brown did not care for "mayonnaise" dressing, while J.W. McDonald was affected so seriously by a "seismatic" disturbance that he was rattled. W.C.A. Moffatt, B.A., being an Industrial Commissioner, naturally didn't know anything about "embarassment."[71]

On April 23, 1914, The Macleod Spectator advertised the single night's engagement of the Frank Morton Co., in a production of "Fifty Miles From Broadway," in addition to two other acts.[72] An accompanying promotional article drew special attention to Morton's reputation as a versatile comedian, describing him as "the George Cohan of the Pacific coast."[73] The company was also scheduled to play the Sherman Theatre in Lethbridge for three days following the Fort Macleod engagement. A press release appearing in The Lethbridge Daily Herald on April 27, 1914, described the company in some detail:

> Three hundred nights in San Francisco is the record of the Frank Morton Co., who open an engagement of three days at the Sherman Theatre, commencing on Thursday, April 30. The company numbers nine capable people, and is one of the largest and best equipped musical comedy companies on tour.[74]

The Frank Morton Company emphasized their strengths in the area of dance and featured the special talents of members of the company in their advertisement. In fact, the company even offered a free demonstration of the latest tango steps. "Mr. Lawrence is a Member of American Dancing Masters Association and will be pleased to demonstrate and explain the steps free on Friday, 2 p.m. to all holders of reserved seat coupons.[75]

After their tour of some of the smaller centres, which included Fort Macleod, Lethbridge, and Red Deer, the Frank Morton Company eventually made an extended stay at the Bijou Theatre in Edmonton. The Edmonton Journal stated that their engagement would "continue for some time," but it did not define the length of the stay.[76] On June 4, 1914, however, The Edmonton Journal printed a brief review of the same show that had played at the Empress in Fort Macleod:

> The Bijou, with its excellent little skit by the Morton company, presents a most likeable bill as the program that ends today. "Fifty Miles From Broadway" is the title of the playlet put on by Mr. Morton and his company, and it makes a very entertaining bit sandwiched between the moving pictures. The acting by each member of the company is very good....A number of the sweetest of popular melodies are sung at appropriate times and sung with splendid effect....[77]

The Macleod Thespians, presenting "The Noble Outcast", were the next troupe to appear on stage at the Empress Theatre. As early as April 16, 1914, The Macleod Spectator began releasing details regarding the performance, stating that the company had originally performed the piece in Pincher Creeek, but had been requested by certain individuals to perform the show in Fort Macleod.[78] The next promotional piece revealed that the Macleod Thespians would be performing "The Noble Outcast" under the auspices of the Macleod Baseball Club.[79] On May 7, 1914, The Macleod Spectator printed a reminder from the Macleod Thespians which stated: "As the proceeds will go towards a good cause we hope you will give us a large share of your patronage."[80] The Macleod Baseball Club must have viewed the evening as a success, for residents of Fort Macleod patronized the performance in large numbers. On May 14, 1914, two days after the performance, The Macleod Specator complimented each member of the cast and described "The Noble Outcast" as a hit:

> The Macleod Thespians covered themselves with glory on Tuesday evening last by their splendid presentation of "The Noble Outcast". The piece was staged at the Empress under the auspices of the Macleod Baseball Club, and was played to a crowded house.[81]

During the spring and summer of 1914, the Empress Theatre featured some alternate forms of live entertainment in several boxing and wrestling matches. The evening typically combined film and the sports matches, and a portion of the proceeds were forfeited to charity or a sponsoring club. A promotional piece which appeared in The Macleod Spectator on May 28, 1914, promised quite an exciting evening at the Empress:

> Manager Scougall of the Empress Theatre announces a big attraction for Tuesday evening, June 5, when Ursus, the Great Canadian Hercules, who is reported to have bested the great Sandou, in several feats of strength will appear here. Sam Clapham, England's champion light weight wrestler will also be in the kill, and offers a dollar a minute to any local man who can stay ten minutes with him. He also offers to throw any three Macleod men in one hour, or forfeit $50 to charity. A special exhibition bout will be put on between Clapham and Geo. McAllister, a local boy, who is supposed to be pretty handy on the mat. There will be 4 reels of pictures.[82]

The match featuring the local grappler was evidently the most exciting, for after the match The Macleod Spectator described that event alone as a "most interesting encounter."[83] In fact, George McAllister was to compete in three more matches at the Empress Theatre that summer: one on June 17, under the auspices of the Macleod Polo Club;[84] another on July 31, after the regular motion pictures;[85] and one on August 14, where McAllister would box instead of wrestle.[86]

Between sports matches, the Empress Theatre featured a production of "The Shepherd of the Hills" on June 22, featuring Miss Gertrude Ritchie. Before she appeared at the Empire Theatre in Edmonton, The Edmonton Journal revealed that Miss Ritchie had gained much experience by working with a Chicago stock company.[87] The Calgary Herald reviewed the company's performance at the Grand Theatre on June 9, 1914, describing the company as "very capable," and Miss Ritchie as "a very winsome and sunny heroine" who handled her part "with grace and spirit."[88] Before the company played the Empress Theatre in Red Deer, The Red Deer Advocate reprinted a review from the Saskatoon Phoenix which emphasized the effect of the backdrop: "The breath of the hills is brought very near the audience in the panoramic back cloth, showing a vast stretch of mountain and wood....[89] Although the Fort Macleod papers did not review the show performed at the Empress on June 22, The Lethbridge Daily Herald described the following night's performance at the Sherman Theatre as "attractive, and by no means devoid of interest."[90]

Vaudeville acts continued to be introduced from time to time. On August 6, 1914, management of the Empress complained that attendance was very poor for Pantages acts which included animal and musical numbers. The quality of the show appears to have been quite good, as the acts were described by The Macleod Spectator as "faultless."[91]

With the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, the patriotic concert became a phenomenon of theatres across western Canada, and the Empress Theatre in Fort Macleod was no exception. Proceeds from the concerts in Fort Macleod were donated to the Patriotic Fund. It is possible that this fund was operated through the Red Cross depot, a central location where the women of Fort Macleod donated their time, services and money. In Fort Macleod, the proceeds from teas, luncheons and other special events were donated to the Red Cross.[92]

On October 8, 1914, The Macleod Spectator announced that a Patriotic concert would be held sometime around October 19, 1914.[93] The concert was subsequently postponed, and an article appearing in The Macleod Spectator on October 29 challenged the residents of Fort Macleod to attend the concert out of duty. The article promised an excellent program with a choir of forty voices singing the latest patriotic songs and choruses.[94]

Just a few days before the Patriotic Concert, the Empress Theatre presented the Richards and Pringle's Minstrels. An advertisement and picture which appeared in The Macleod Spectator revealed that the company consisted of at least thirty members, with six "big" comedians. The company also promised a "gorgeous street parade."[95] Before a performance at the Lyric Theatre in Red Deer, The Red Deer Advocate billed the company as "the leading minstrel company of the country,"[96] and The Edmonton Journal described the troupe as "the best and brightest minstrel organization ever brought together."[97] The Edmonton Journal also described one of the more interesting members of the company:

> Mr. Watts, who is now in his seventy-fifth year, has been connected with this company twenty-three years, and during that time has sung but two songs, those old-time gems, dear to hearts of those of us

> whose hair is sprinkled with gray, "Silver Threads Among the Gold," and "When You and I Were Young, Maggie."
>
> This old gentleman has a voice of truly remarkable range and sweetness.[98]

The Calgary Herald quoted the manager of the company as saying that the minstrel troupe was having "one of the best seasons in its history," and he promised that the show would be new and exciting, even to the "jaded theatregoers."[99]

The review of the Richards and Pringle's Minstrels which appeared in The Calgary Herald was significantly more detailed and positive than the brief note which appeared in The Macleod Spectator. The Herald stated:

> It would be insidious to mention any particular contributor to the programme, for in dancing, singing, and instrumental numbers there was a general excellence shown and heard. Even the cornet in the orchestra was played as we do not hear cornets played here, clearness being secured without the exertion of too much lung power, hence there being no too obtrusive brass. The saxophone quartette gave a most melodious turn, and altogether moonlight 'mongst the Georgia pines and elsewhere was very entertaining.[100]

Most of the articles make a point of mentioning that the minstrel company was authentic, consisting of Negro performers and not blackface imitators. The Macleod Spectator writes of the performance at the Empress: "The theatre was crowded to the doors. The show was very fair, and the majority of the people appeared to be pleased with it."[101] In In Memoriam -- Oldtime Show Biz, Jack Burton describes the charm of a typical minstrel show, based upon his personal memories of minstrel shows he viewed during the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth.

> Basically, they were all cast in the same mold -- a first part of tenor and bass solos and endmen's songs and gags; an olio consisting of a blackface monologue, a precision drill by the entire company, a dancing act, and a specialty like that of Waterbury Brothers and Tenney, who as two baggage masters and a colored porter in a railroad station converted mailbags into musical bells, baggage trucks into xylophones and parts of a dismantled chandelier into cornets and trombones; and an after-piece in which darktown dandies and their wenches cake-walked, tap-danced and cut all manner of fancy capers.
>
> But despite their similarity, these minstrel shows never lost their charm. Each and every one provided clean and wonderful entertainment, and brought us great vocalists and great comedians with new songs to enrich our daily lives.[102]

The audience in Fort Macleod had seen amateur minstrel shows on occasion since the very first winter at the old fort when the N.W.M.P. burnt-corked their faces and put on an evening's entertainment. Authentic troupes such as the Richards and Pringle's Minstrels appeared much more infrequently, and were likely enjoyed even more for that very reason.

In keeping with the spirit of patriotism during the war years, the first live entertainment at the Empress in 1915 was an Irish Patriotic Concert on January 12. Proceeds from the concert were given to the Patriotic Fund. On January 21, 1915, The Macleod Spectator gave highlights from the concert which revealed that there were a large number of performers involved in the concert including a chorus of young girls singing "The Maple Leaf," the Empress Orchestra, a comedy sketch featuring two Lethbridge amateurs, a Boy

Scout's March and Chorus, as well as several solo and duet performers:

> P.D. McLean, an employee of the C.P.R., proved a "find." This was his first appearance before a Macleod audience, but he sang with the ease of one long accustomed to the footlights. He has a powerful baritone voice of pleasing quality and upon the conclusion of his number "Asleep in the Deep" was given an ovation. He good naturedly responded to the encore, and his second number was equally pleasing.[103]

It is clear from the review that there was an enthusiastic participation in these patriotic concerts, whether the Fort Macleod resident was a performer or a member of the audience. Proceeds from the Irish Patriotic Concert totalled over one hundred dollars.[104]

The Parkerville School gave their own Patriotic Concert in the Empress Theatre on March 9, 1915. Although patriotic concerts had been "coming pretty thick" during that winter, the school concert was quite successful, according to The Macleod Spectator, especially because the children took up the military theme:

> Miss Abram, the teacher at Parkerville, deserves great credit for her training of the children who took part in the programme. The performance of these tots was the feature of the evening. They gave a burlesque "Military Drill," and the local bits brought down the house.[105]

The evening must have been especially meaningful for the performers, as the same article reports that the audience itself had quite a military appearance because there were a large number of the "boys in khaki" present. Generally, audience response to the patriotic concerts was reported to be very enthusiastic. Most reviews describe the shows in terms of some measurable audience response such as "rousing encores," "thunderous applause" or "bringing the house down." Promotional articles also strongly encouraged the residents of Fort Macleod to attend the concerts by specifically appealing to their sense of duty and moral obligation to their representatives on the front lines. This type of emotional appeal likely aroused some of the enthusiasm that was demonstrated for the patriotic concerts.

Serial films in which episodes were shown in installments appear to have been the main attraction at the Empress during 1915; however, on June 3, The Macleod Spectator announced that the "1915 Follies" would appear at the Empress the following Monday for one night only.[106] The Follies also appeared at the Majestic Theatre the two nights immediately following the Macleod engagement. A promotional article in The Lethbridge Daily Herald revealed a few details about the company and their itinerary:

> This sparkling company has in a very short time scored a sensational success in the coast cities and on Vancouver Island, including a seven weeks' engagement at Vancouver, and four weeks in Victoria, and much interest is being evinced in their tour of Canada.
>
> B.C. Hilliam is the "Folly" chief, and he comes with a big reputation from the London concert halls.[107]

On June 9 The Lethbridge Daily Herald reviewed the "1915 Follies" after their performance at the Majestic Theatre. The review of the performance at the Empress Theatre in Fort Macleod was evidently reprinted in part from the June 9th review in The Lethbridge Daily Herald.[108] Both shows were well attended and apparently enjoyed by the audience. The Macleod Spectator printed the review on June 10, 1915, stating:

> A real treat was given the residents of Macleod on Monday night last when the "Nineteen Fifteen Follies" made their appearance at the Empress Theatre. A large audience was present at the opening of the entertainment, who thoroughly enjoyed the entertainment provided them by the clever representatives of this company....
>
> A repetition of such a performance would be heartily welcomed.
>
> When interviewed the members of the company stated that they were delighted with the patronage given them, and for the kindness shown them during their visit to Macleod.[109]

During August of 1915, Manager McRae at the Empress disputed with owner T. B. Martin over rent. This is the issue that was known as the Empress Theatre versus the People's Theatre. McRae moved his operation to the Town Hall and activity at the Empress was minimal throughout the autumn. Films were still shown at the Empress, but it appears that there was no live entertainment for the duration of the year. McRae did not return to the Empress Theatre until the new year.

On February 24, 1916, The Macleod Spectator announced that the Empress Theatre would re-open, again under the management of Mr. McRae.[110] For the re-opening night, McRae featured "Within the Law," performed by the United Producing Company. Reviews of performances in Edmonton, Calgary and Lethbridge were all favorable. On December 31, 1915, The

Edmonton Journal stated: "Judged by the best standards, the presentation had genuine merit. It gave no little pleasure and served to bring home more than ever the cleverness of the dialogue and the construction."111 The performance by the same company at the Grand Theatre in Calgary was reviewed by The Calgary Daily Herald. This brief review emphasized that the audience had been pleased by both the "unfolding of the story" and the skill of the actors in mastering the roles.[112] "Within the Law" was performed at the Majestic Theatre in Lethbridge the week previous to the Fort Macleod engagement. The Lethbridge Daily Herald commented that "good scenic equipment greatly enhanced the enjoyment of the play" and noted that the large audience had "thoroughly appreciated every line and situation."[113] According to a review appearing in The Macleod Spectator on February 24, 1916, the performance of "Within the Law" at the Empress Theatre resulted in record attendance.

> We think we are safe in saying that everybody at the Empress on Monday night enjoyed the show immensely. The show and stage settings were well and pleasantly put on and the company as a whole deserves credit with the possible exception of one or two weak points....
>
> Mr. McRae, manager of the Empress, deserves great credit for bringing this show to Macleod, and the results obtained show the people's appreciation, the house being filled to capacity with several people turned away and beating all records for a road attraction in the town.[114]

The United Producing Company appeared for the second time at the Empress exactly one month later, this time with a production of "Fine Feathers." An advertisement appearing in The Red Deer Advocate guaranteed that the show would be even better than "Within the Law,"[115] and The Lethbridge Daily Herald concurred with the statement by speculating that "Fine Feathers" would "out-class" the previous show.[116] Although the Fort Macleod papers did not review "Fine Feathers," The Edmonton Journal commented quite extensively on the show after it played at the Empire Theatre on February 28, 1916:

> It was a small crowd that saw "Fine Feathers" at the Empire last night, but it was given a genuine dramatic treat. The production was, in one respect, unique in Edmonton theatrical history. The company was gathered together here from different centres and has been rehearsing the play for some weeks back. At the end of the engagement on Wednesday it will go on the road.... If the people know a good thing when they see it, the venture should prove a successful one in every way. There is not the slightest question of its artistic merit.[117]

If the show was as well received as "Within the Law", there is no doubt that the tour was successful.

On March 29, 1916, the Empress Theatre was filled to capacity when a production of "The Minister's Bride" was produced by the ladies of the Methodist church. After listing the names of all the local performers in the play, The Macleod Spectator commented on the highlights of the show:

> All the parts were well taken, and special mention should be made of Mr. and Mrs. Thewlis. Their acting compared with professionals and any time they held the stage, they kept the audience in roars of laughter.... Mrs. Young and Mr. Thompson in their duet "Hunting Tower" was the star turn of the evening. The duet was beautifully rendered, and they fully deserved the

repeated encores they had to answer.[118]

The show also served to allow a Lieutenant Watkins Hancock to make a recruiting speech to the able-bodied men of Fort Macleod, asking them to consider joining the Kiltie Regiment, which was stationed in Lethbridge at the time.[119]

The Empress Theatre promised its patrons a very exciting and current play when it announced that "The White Feather" would appear on its stage on April 17, 1916. A promotional piece in The Macleod Spectator described the show as the "most dramatic feature of the great World War" because it dealt with the exploits of German spies in England.[120] Before its presentation at the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg, The Manitoba Free Press described the production in terms of its previous successes in London, New York, and eastern Canada. The same article also stated that "The White Feather" had attracted large audiences at both the large and small centres and that it "amply justified the belief of those who have been demanding a better class of attractions for the smaller cities of Canada."[121] A review of a performance of "The White Feather" at the Empire Theatre in Edmonton appeared in The Edmonton Journal on January 11, 1916: "It was given its first Edmonton presentation at the Empire last evening and proved a very agreeable surprise. It is well written and well constructed and the company is a first class one throughout."[122] On January 15, The Calgary Daily Herald described the Calgary run of "The White Feather" as a triumph:

> With this afternoon and tonight's performances "The White Feather" closes its remarkably successful engagement at the Grand theatre. "The White Feather" came to Calgary, modestly announced and heralded, and it met a fate which no press agent's attempts, no sensational advertising could give it -- it scored a triumph and brought the town to its feet. There is little use to say much about "The White Feather" now since its merits are so well known, save to advise everybody to go and see it. No finer company has ever been seen on the local stage and the whole effect is of a very acute and artistic feeling of naturalness. There is not one discordant note.[123]

The reviews typically describe the show in great detail, emphasizing highlights in the plot as well as the cast. The performance of Albert Brown in the lead role is given particular attention. The Lethbridge Daily Herald writes:

> All praise is due Mr. Albert Brown, who is seen in the part of Brent, the British secret service agent.... Polished, quick as lightening in the critical moments, sustaining the interest in the various "big scenes," he gave one of the finest individual performances ever seen on the local stage.[124]

There are no apparent negative comments appearing in any of the reviews of the Alberta performances of "The White Feather." It is likely that the show was well received in Fort Macleod as well; however, for some reason The Macleod Spectator did not review the performance.

The next live performance on the Empress stage was to be a minstrel show with a company of fifteen performers. The Reese Brothers Big Minstrel Company offered comedy, singing, and dancing to the patrons of the Empress Theatre. The preview appearing in The Macleod Spectator stated that the performance of the Reese Brothers Big Minstrel Company on May 18, 1916, would be suitable for all audiences and that it had played "to capacity business in every town on their circuit."[125] A preview which appeared in The Lethbridge Daily Herald on May 13, 1916, promised that the show would have all the features "which have for years past been recognized as symbolical of a real minstrel company."[126] The same article also announced that the comapny would parade the main streets of Lethbridge with a brass minstrel band. The review of the performance on May 15, 1916, at the Majestic Theatre in Lethbridge, indicated that the show fulfilled its promise to be a typical "old time" minstrel show. The Lethbridge Daily Herald commented:

> A well filled house was well pleased with the show given by the Reese Brothers Africander Minstrel Company at the Majestic theatre last night, and it is safe to predict another good sized audience for tonight, when the same show will be repeated for the last time. The show will appeal to those who appreciate the minstrel form of entertainment; it is clean and entirely devoid of any trace of vulgarity. Plenty of good singing and dancing, an abundance of witty jokes and good comedy, and a tip top orchestra all help the show along to the success it deserves.[127]

Again, it is likely that the audience in Fort Macleod was equally satisfied with the minstrel show when it played the Empress two nights later.

The Empress Theatre featured the concert performance of the New York Metropolitan Company, featuring Skovgaard, Denmark's famous violinist, as its next major live attraction. The company consisted of four singers, Skovgaard, and a pianist named Alice McClung. The performance was apparently comprised of "duets and trios from well known operas in original costume,"[128] as well as some instrumental numbers. The highlight of the evening was predicted to be the performance by Skovgaard. Evidently, the New York Metropolitan Company pleased the reviewer from The Lethbridge Daily Herald. On June 9, 1916, the paper complimented the company, writing:

> Skovgaard, with his priceless Stradivarius violin, and a concert company of excellent musical talent, scored a notable triumph at the Majestic theatre last evening. It was a performance remarkable for the general excellence of every number of the program. Skovgaard thrilled his audience last night.[129]

The same article remarks that the company was incomplete because one of the members had been taken ill while travelling on the train from Fernie, British Columbia. This indicates that the company also performed short-handed at the Empress in Fort Macleod. The company went on to the Al Azhar Temple in Calgary where they performed under the auspices of the Women's Benevolent Society for the benefit of the prisoners of war,[130] and then to the Lyric Theatre in Red Deer.[131]

Billed as "The Play That Will Live Forever," Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" appeared at the Empress Theatre for a single night's engagement on July 19, 1916.[132] The show appeared in Fort Macleod direct from a three-day run at the Grand Theatre in Calgary. The Calgary Daily

Herald previewed the run by drawing attention to both the company and the mechanical effects employed in the production:

> During the past thirty years in which the bill has been a standard attraction, many new and novel mechanical devices have been invented to complete the various illusions which held to give the right atmosphere to the story. Barnum and Aylesworth have spared no expense in providing every mechanical detail known to modern stagecraft, which is one reason, no doubt, why the piece has proved such a tremendous success....[133]

Although the United Producing Company promised great mechanical effects, a review of the performance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" at the Empire Theatre in Edmonton praised the acting rather than the stagecraft. The production was well received by the Edmonton audience. On August 25, 1916, The Edmonton Journal wrote:

> Memories of childhood days, when the gallery gods could hiss the villain and eat peanuts and throw the shells on the floor without restraint from a six-foot policeman were revived last night at the Empire Theatre when the United Producing Company presented "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to a good sized audience, which laughed and sobbed where laughter and sobs were quite appropriate, and seemed highly pleased over the specialties between and during acts.[134]

The United Producing Company also performed "Charlie's Aunt" at the Empress Theatre shortly after their performance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." An advertisement in The Red Deer Advocate on June 2, 1916, indicated that the show had a cast of twelve people,[135] and a preview in The Lethbridge Daily Herald promised the audience "two moral hours" of uninterrupted laughter.[136] The Macleod Spectator printed a brief, yet positive comment about the performance of "Charley's Aunt" in Fort Macleod:

> The comedy, "Charley's Aunt," enacted at the Empress theatre, was well worth seeing. Mr. Van Murrel, who took the part of Lord Babberly or Charley's Aunt from Brazil, where the nuts come from, was exceptionally clever, both in his impersonation and acting, and being supported by a first rate company, the play proved a tremendous success.[137]

Management at the Empress Theatre brought a large-scale musical comedy to its stage on September 25, 1916, with "Alma, Where Do You Live?" The company of twenty performers was comprised in part of a "beauty chorus" of ten who were described as "remarkably pretty girls" in a release in The Calgary Daily Herald. As well, special note was made of the fact that the chorus would wear a variety of attractive costumes during the production.[138] The advertisement appearing in The Macleod Spectator on September 14, went so far as to describe the costumes as "dainty,"[139] and the review in The Lethbridge Daily Herald on September 30, described the chorus members as "stunners."[140] Although the review gives credit for some of the acting, beauty appears to have been the main feature of the show: "Miss Betty Harrison makes the most of her part of Alma, the girl in the story, having good stage appearance and displaying several stunning gowns."[141]

The Royal Gwent Welsh Singers appeared on the Empress stage on November 27, 1916, as one of the appearances on their fourth American tour. An advertisement in The

Edmonton Journal revealed that the singers were comprised of fifteen voices with three soloists from Wales and one from the London Grand Opera.[142] The well-known singers also appeared at the Wesley church auditorium in Lethbridge. After expenses, the proceeds from this particular performance went to the local branch of the Red Cross.[143]

On November 23, 1916, The Macleod News printed the news about a show that residents of Fort Macleod had evidently been waiting for in anticipation:

> We are able to announce definitely that "Peg O' My Heart" (about which there has been so much talk and so many enquiries as to when it would be produced in Macleod) will be at the Empress for one night only, Monday, December, 4th.[144]

The accompanying advertisement stated that the show would be presented by the same company that had played Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal. According to the same advertisment, "Peg 'O My Heart" had played for 604 nights in New York and 900 nights in London.[145] Presented by the United Producing Company, the show travelled with a company of sixteen artists.[146] On November 3, 1916, The Edmonton Journal reviewed "Peg O' My Heart" after it was performed at the Empire Theatre in Edmonton. The reviewer described The United Producing Company's production as inferior to previous productions of "Peg O' My Heart" which had appeared on the Edmonton stage; however, the reviewer conceded that considerable talent had been displayed and that "the audience undoubtedly enjoyed itself."[147] The Calgary Daily Herald devoted much more space to reviewing the same production after it appeared at the Grand Theatre. The writer of this review printed on December 29, 1916, emphasized audience response to the play:

> When it is said that the Peg show at the Grand last night was not finished until just at midnight, and that the applause and curtain calls which Miss La Vern got were the most enthusiastic which has greeted any performer at this theatre for a very long time, the recital of these facts tells how big a hit it was with the audience.[148]

The Macleod News is very brief in its comment about the performance at the Empress: "Manager Bowker should be congratulated on the play at the Empress theatre last Monday night. Peg O' My Heart certainly takes some beating."[149] The show was also scheduled to play in Lethbridge at the Majestic Theatre on December 9,1916; however, the company was in a C.P.R. wreck and therefore the show was cancelled.[150]

By the end of 1916 then, a basic pattern had emerged with regard to the nature and frequency of live theatrical professional shows at the Empress Theatre in Fort Macleod. Throughout the first four and a half years of its operation, the Empress had featured repertory companies performing a variety of plays both serious and comic, opera companies, dance troupes, vaudeville and minstrel shows, concert musicians, large musical revues, acrobats, and juvenile entertainers.

Most companies played the Empress Theatre for one night only before moving on to one of the larger centres. Often the tour included a one- to three-day run in Lethbridge, either immediately before or after a single night's performance in Fort Macleod. Other Alberta centres featuring the same shows included Red Deer, Calgary and Edmonton while several advertisements mention performances of specific companies in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Montreal and the West Coast.

The Empress Theatre was built with the intention that both live theatrical entertainment and film would be featured. The Empress advertised far more for film than for live features, so it can be concluded that film was shown more often. It appears that live theatrical entertainment produced by professional companies was performed at the Empress between eight to ten times per year up to about 1920. This information is derived mainly from the local Fort Macleod papers and therefore depends upon the frequency and reliability of advertisements, previews and reviews. It is very likely that the press did not carry advertisments or news releases for every live show. For example, during 1916, The Lethbridge Herald was unable to carry news releases on at least two occasions. In one instance, there was a lack of space[151]; in another situation, the paper described an outside influence: "Owing to pressure of telegraphic news today, the Herald is unable to give extended press notices for the theatres."[152] Combined with amateur dramatic entertainment then, live theatre was enjoyed by the audience at the Empress approximately ten to twelve times per year.

The pattern for professional entertainment which was established in the first five years of operation, then, apparently continued in a similar manner for some time. For example, in 1917 the Empress Theatre featured such shows as "In Walked Jimmy," presented by the United Producing Company;[153] a repeat performance of "The Rosary";[154] "Tess of the Storm Country";[155] "The Barrier," with Frank Ireson who had starred in "The Rosary";[156] a farce entitled "Henpecked Henry";[157] and "The Love of a King" with Albert Brown, star of "The White Feather."[158] Musicals and vaudeville included a music and dance extravaganza featuring a female chorus entitled "The Man in the Moon"[159]; "Mutt and Jeff's Wedding," with a cast of twenty[160]; and a performance by a juvenile company called The Jolly Entertainers[161]. There were also live performances by Skovgaard and the New York Metropolitan Company[162]; and Powell, the Magician[163].

Patrons of the Empress Theatre in Fort Macleod had the opportunity to experience at least eleven live professional shows during 1917. Several of these companies had appeared on the Empress stage at least once before. The performance of Powell the Magician in October 1917 may have been the first time that a magic show was presented at the Empress, although not the first time shows of this type were brought to Fort Macleod. In any event, many more magicians amazed patrons of the Empress in the years to come.

The 1918 live professional entertainment season at the Empress consisted mainly of companies and plays that had performed before on the Empress stage. The year opened with a return performance by Albert Brown in "The White Feather,"[164] which had previously played at the Empress in 1916. During 1918, The United Producing Company presented "The Isle O' Dreams,"[165] "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch,"[166] "The Brat,"[167] and "Peg O' My Heart."[168] Musicals included "The Girl From Over There," by the Famous Bostonians;[169] "A Daughter of the Sun," complete with native Hawaiian ukulele players and hula dancers;[170] and "My Soldier Girl," which featured a novelty routine called the Flirtation Walk.[171] This chorus-line stunt demanded an extension of the stage over the heads of the audience and the elimination of some seats.[172] It is not known how the stage was extended for this particular show; however, the alterations to the theatre were temporary. Apparently, this was only the second time that the stage was extended for a specific show. The first occasion was in 1913, when the stage was permanently deepened by ten feet to accommodate the Boston Opera Company. Other professional attractions appearing at the Empress in 1918 included a magician and mind-reader named Professor Cunning,[173] the Hallowell Company Nine Piece Orchestra,[174] and Ali Ben Deb the hypnotist.[175] The only minstrel company appearing at the Empress in 1918 seems to have been Lowery's Greater Minstrels, with a troupe of thirty-five.[176] During the 1918 season, approximately twelve live professional shows made appearances at the Empress Theatre.

In 1919, the Empress management began to alter the theatre's season of live entertainment. In comparison to the previous years, the Empress offered less live entertainment in the form of travelling repertory companies such as the United Producing Company, and more in the form of regularly scheduled vaudeville. Although it is unclear why the change at the Empress occurred in 1919, former vaudeville performer of the Canadian prairies, Maureen Englin, writes that Canadian vaudeville experienced its most successful years between 1911 and 1928.[177] This indicates that vaudeville was evidently enjoying a period of popularity in 1919. It is likely, then, that management of the Empress Theatre was seizing the opportunity to bring some very popular entertainment to Fort Macleod on a regular basis.

Until October of 1919, the Empress season featured a typical bill comprised of a hypnotist, minstrel shows, a concert, a wrestling match, and at least one comedy-drama. On October 9, 1919, however, the Empress Theatre announced a change of schedule in The Macleod News. An advertisement announced that the new weekly schedule would feature:

"Hippodrome high class vaudeville at the Empress every Thursday at 8:15 sharp."[178] With this new schedule in place, Thursday was the only night of the week when theatre patrons could enjoy live entertainment at the Empress. Every other night (except Sunday, which was dark), the theatre featured films from Paramount and Star. This change of schedule at the Empress was very well advertised in The Macleod News; in fact, there were three advertisements and two feature articles in the October 9, 1919 issue of the paper. One article described the nature and general composition of a Hippodrome show:

> In securing the Hippodrome Circuit the Management of the Empress Theatre realized that it would be useless to bring anything but the best class of Vaudeville to Macleod if the patronage was to be maintained throughout the season....There will be four acts each Thursday night and will altogether consist of from eight to fourteen artists. In addition to this there will be four reels of pictures shown and the entire show will last about two hours, commencing at 8:15 sharp.[179]

The opening night acts were also described in some detail. For the premiere performance at the Empress, the Hippodrome Vaudeville show featured live acts such as Lewis and Bardo, a duo performing a singing and talking comedy routine; Pearl's Pets, an animal act with ten trained dogs; the Menke Sisters, character entertainers; and La Terese, a dancer presenting a character dance revue. The article promised that the show would deliver laughter, stunts, music, beauty, and popular material.[180]

For the duration of 1919, Hippodrome Vaudeville was the dominant form of professional theatrical entertainment at the Empress Theatre in Fort Macleod. Beyond vaudeville there was a single night's performance of "Make Yourself At Home," a large-scale musical with twenty-five in the company,[181] and a performance by Blackstone the Magician.[182] One other performance of special note was Sheridan's comedy of manners, "The School for Scandal," produced by the Devereux Company. The Macleod News described the day of the performance as "a red letter day in the dramatic history of Macleod."[183] Before appearing in Fort Macleod, the company had toured in the United States and Western Canada, including such cities as Winnipeg, Saskatoon and Regina.[184]

On December 5, 1919, The Macleod News gave a favorable review of the performance of "The School For Scandal." On the same page, however, the paper reserved even more praise for the "Hippo" show at the Empress which had been running two nights per week since November 26, 1919:

> The hippodrome vaudeville program now being shown at the Empress Theatre on Wednesday and Thursday evenings of each week is one of the best variety shows that have been given in Macleod for many a long day....The last two weeks their program has been equal to any hippodrome program shown in any of the larger cities, and this week's program is par excellence.[185]

During 1920, advertising and promotional articles for movies became significantly more prominent in the local newspaper. Hippodrome Vaudeville continued to play at the Empress until at least June of 1920, although it was apparently not a regular weekly feature. In addition to vaudeville, there was a sports match;[186] a performance by The Dumbells, twenty-two soldier/actors who had previously entertained the troops in France;[187] a farce called "The Goose Girl" produced by Billy Oswald and Company;[188] a special evening of entertainment sponsored by the Hudson's Bay Company;[189] Khaym, the Mystery Man of India;[190] "A Night in Honolulu"[191] and "Pretty Baby,"[192] two musicals; and two comedies titled "Peck's Bad Boy"[193] and "Pal O' Mine."[194] During the autumn there was a "1920 Revue" by the Winnipeg Kiddies,[195] "Come Along Mary," a musical comedy with cast of forty people;[196] a comedy drama titled "Grumpy,"[197] and a production of "Experience," a popular moral drama.[198]

Beyond these performances there was another unique but risqué evening of live entertainment at the Empress. On July 8, 1920, Mack Sennett's Bathing Beauties appeared in person on the Empress stage. A preview for the performance appeared in The Macleod Times on June 30, 1920:

> There are blondes and brunettes, practically uniform as to size and possess the shapeliness necessary to set off their bathing costumes.
>
> After being introduced on the screen, the young ladies make their appearance in person clad in sporting costumes, in which they give a song and dance and with each song scantier costumes are presented until they reach the bathing suit chorus when the girls appear in some daring effects.[199]

The advertisement for the show claimed that the revue would be "something quite different"[200] and it is evident that this was a unique performance for Fort Macleod. The whole evening's entertainment was particularly significant because of the combination of film and live performance. The "bathing beauties" appeared first on the screen and then made a live appearance.

After 1920 the incidence of live professional theatre at the Empress declined significantly. It appears that there were only five live professional shows at the Empress during 1921, including a variety mystery show with magic, hypnotism, illusions and escapes;[201] plays and vaudeville produced by Arlie Marks and her associate players (daughter of Tom Marks);[202] "Mademoiselle of Armentiers" by the P.B.I. Players;[203] "Tootlums" with Lawrance D'Orsay and his English company;[204] and a variety show by Alma Gray and her company of England's music-hall performers.[205]

During 1922 and 1923, The Macleod Times printed advertising for only two professional shows at the Empress. In 1924 and 1925, the Empress Theatre featured three vaudeville companies, two plays by road companies, two performances by children's companies, one concert, one musical revue, and one opera. Each year from 1926 to 1937, the Empress generally featured between one to three road companies performing comedies or musical comedies. There was an occasional vaudeville or minstrel show, but it usually accompanied the regular film presentation. Beyond this, professsional entertainment at the Empress from 1926 to 1937 consisted of three or four concerts, one boxing match, two operas, one magician, and one astrologist.

Amateur performance during 1917-1937 involved a variety of different sponsoring groups and dramatic clubs. Although it is evident that the incidence of professional performance was beginning to decline during this period, amateur dramatic groups continued to be active. Due to local interest, the newspapers generally allotted space both to promote the show well in advance, and to review members of the community who had been performers. Local amateur productions were generally large scale, involving many people in performance and technical production. Proceeds raised through the performances were generally used for charitable causes, so good promotion enabled the amateur group to achieve its fund-raising goals.

On January 25, 1917, a Grand Scotch Concert was held at the Empress Theatre with proceeds donated to the Red Cross. A review which appeared in The Macleod News on February 2, 1917, outlined the program in some detail. The same review revealed that the amateur performance was enjoyed by a huge audience.

> The Scotch concert held at the Empress theatre on Thursday evening last (Burns night) was one of the most successful ever held in Macleod.
>
> The concert was timed to commence at 8:30 but long before that hour the house was packed to the utmost capacity. Standing room at the back was even impossible and a large number of people witnessed the performance from their cars on 24th St.[206]

The evening was comprised of a variety of acts, including vocal numbers, instrumental performance, dance, and a public address on the life of Robert Burns. The list of performers indicates that there were between thirty and forty persons involved in the total production.

A somewhat smaller production was presented at the Empress Theatre on April 26, 1917 by the Methodist Amateur Theatrical Company. Various church groups often performed in the Empress Theatre. In addition to the Methodist group, the Empress was used by the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Catholic congregations. In most instances, it appears that the churches not only sponsored the productions, but also provided the performers from the members of their congregations. According to the review of the Methodist Amateur Theatrical Company, which appeared in The Macleod News on May 3, the quality of acting was very good and the production was enjoyed by the audience. The group also featured several musical numbers.

> A very fine comedy was enacted at the Empress theatre on Thursday evening last by the Methodist Amateur Theatrical Company. The comedy was entitled "The Young Village Doctor" and the audience was certainly kept in roars of laughter....In the chorus of Mr. Thewlis' song, "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag, and Smile, Smile, Smile," the singing of the small lad of about six years brought the house down, and he was repeatedly encored.[207]

The review does not reveal the amount of the evening's proceeds, nor to what cause they were designated.

Another successful Scotch Concert was held on January

24, 1918. The group presenting the concert was unable to secure the Empress Theatre on Burns' Night, so was forced to present the concert one day early.[208] Evidently, the 1918 Scotch Concert was as successful as the one presented the year before. The review in The Macleod News again listed the variety of performers in the program, such as pipers, vocal soloists, highland dancers, violinists, pianists, and lecturers.[209] There were obviously many talented amateur performers located in Fort Macleod. The proceeds of over three hundred dollars from the concert and accompanying dance were given to the local disabled soldiers.

The next amateur dramatic production at the Empress Theatre was reviewed by both The Macleod News and a correspondent writing for the The Lethbridge Daily Herald. The Empress Theatre was rarely mentioned in The Lethbridge Daily Herald, and it is not known why the correspondent chose to comment on this particular show. On February 12, 1918, the pupils of Mrs. Seymour, assisted by other local talent, presented the operetta, "Snow-White." On February 14, 1918, The Lethbridge Daily Herald praised Mrs. Seymour and the company:

> The entertainment given in the Empress Theatre last evening in aid of the Red Cross funds, by the pupils of Mrs. Kerr Seymour assisted by other local talent, was a most decided and enjoyable success, both as regarding monetary considerations and excellency of program....
>
> Without detracting from the excellent manner in which all parts were taken, special mention might be made of the ability shown by Mrs. James Young as "the Queen," Miss Margaret Watson as "Prince Charming," Miss

> Vera Nenson as "Princess Snow-White." Professionals could hardly have improved on these artists.[210]

The review went on to mention that over three hundred dollars was raised for the benefit of the Red Cross.

The review in The Macleod News on February 14, 1918 was also filled with praise for the performance of "Snow-White." The reviewer's opening comments made a succinct, yet astute observation regarding amateur talent in Fort Macleod:

> The local talent in Macleod is undoubtedly wonderful. The performance given at the Empress Theatre on Tuesday evening was perfect, both in acting and in the vocal numbers. Mrs. Seymour, who was responsible for the production of the operetta "Snow-White," deserves the greatest commendation, although it must be a big satisfaction to her to see the way in which the play was received by the huge audience.[211]

The overall production of the operetta was evidently a cooperative effort, with Mrs. Seymour directing her own pupils as well as other performers from the community, and the ladies of the Red Cross preparing the costumes.[212]

The Macleod Board of Trade held two grand concerts in the summer of 1919. The first concert was held on July 22 by the Board of Trade Concert Party under the auspices of The Great War Next-of-Kin Association. Proceeds from the concert were in aid of a war memorial.[213]

The second Board of Trade Concert was held on Sept 23, 1919. According to a review in The Macleod News, this concert was a fall and winter season opener for a season of similar concerts. The September concert involved both a Lethbridge concert party and local Fort Macleod musicians.[214] On September 25, 1919, The Macleod News described the concert as a "huge success":

> The opening program for the Macleod Board of Trade Concerts for the fall and winter season proved a huge success, at the Empress Theatre on Tuesday evening last. It was undoubtedly one of the finest exhibitions of musical talent ever held in Macleod.
>
> A large appreciative audience was in attendance, and they were certainly entertained to a fist class and talented musical program.[215]

The Board of Trade Concerts for the 1919 season which were to follow apparently played at the Town Hall rather than at the Empress.[216] It is possible that with the introduction of regular Hippodrome Vaudeville in 1919, the Empress cold not accommodate the Board of Trade. The Board of Trade Concert Party may have also played at the Town Hall because of the affiliation of the Board of Trade with the municipal government of the Town of Fort Macleod.

The Macleod Dramatic Society presented a variety program on November 19, 1919 at the Empress Theatre. The program included a farcical sketch, a forty-minute vaudeville program, and a short comedy sketch.[217] On November 20, 1919, The Macleod News offered highlights from the show which drew particular attention to the talents of the local performers. The amateurs were complimented on their ability to perform as well or better than professionals:

> Mr. S. Heap was perfect in the leading role of Mr. Tittums, a middle-aged henpecked husband, upon whose difficulties and troubles the play is based. He filled the part to perfection. He was ably supported by Mr. G. L. Stevens....Mr. Stevens, who is an actor of rare

> ability, is to be congratulated on his performance. He is far better than the average professional comedian....
>
> The outstanding feature of the show was the complete absence of any amateurish effects, the entire comapny appearing perfectly at home on the stage.[218]

Both the audience and the reviewer were apparently pleased with the performance, particularly because it was equal to professional standards of quality. The review also indicated the intention of the Macleod Dramatic Society to produce several more variety programs.[219]

The Macleod Board of Trade presented the first live concert of 1920 at the Empress Theatre. On January 7, 1920 the Board presented an evening of entertainment featuring boxing, wrestling, and vaudeville by local performers.[220]

Following this concert was the annual Burns Night Concert which was described as an excellent show but lacking in comedy. This concert was not as well attended as the previous Burns Concerts.[221] According to The Macleod News, these appear to be the only amateur productions of 1920. During 1920 however, there was a busy professional season consisting of regularly scheduled vaudeville shows, fifteen live productions and one sports match. The Empress Theatre also began promoting film more extensively during 1920. With such a busy professional season and the heavy promotion of film, it is possible that the Empress could not accommodate more amateur groups during that year.

In 1921, the Empress Theatre featured one locally produced drama. The Macleod Dramatic Society presented "Mrs. Temple's Telegram," a three-act comedy. On April 14, 1921, The Macleod Times reviewed the performance:

> The production "Mrs. Temple's Telegram" by the Macleod Dramatic Society at the Empress Theatre last night was the best seen in Macleod for some time and indubitably the best amateur performance ever seen in Macleod. Much of the success of the play was due to the untiring efforts of Mrs. Mercer, who was the manager of the troupe.[222]

The play was performed a second time on April 19, with proceeds collected in aid of the Macleod Hockey Club.[223]

Between 1922 and 1937 the Empress continued to be used by many different local amateur groups. The Macleod Dramatic Society performed several times over the years but other clubs and organizations, such as the Macleod Agricultural Society, the C.P.R. Ladies, the Macleod Band, the Broom Ball Club, the Macleod Elks, the W.I. Girls Club, the local branch of the Legion, the Anglican Young People's Society, the Presbyterian Young People, and the Catholic Women's League, sponsored local performers in order to raise funds for particular causes. Dramatic troupes such as the Granum Dramatic Society and the Claresholm Operatic Society from the towns surrounding Fort Macleod also made use of the Empress Theatre. The Empress was also evidently a desirable space for recitals and concerts for the pupils of local music and dance teachers. Thus, the Macleod School Children, the pupils of Miss Irene Young, the pupils of Miss

Florence Carstairs, the pupils of Gladys and Betty Gilroy, the Peter Pan Kindergarten, and the pupils of Mr. and Mrs. F. Cutler (resident musicians for the Empress) all danced, played instruments or sang on the Empress stage. The Macleod Choral Society also gave a concert at the Empress. Several benefit concerts were performed by local amateurs, and there were also a few plays presented by "local talent," or "Macleod's leading amateurs" rather than by a particular group.

Other local activity on the Empress stage included periodical amateur nights, although it is not known what these nights involved. There was also an Old Time Fiddler's Contest at the theatre. Dramatic festivals were held at the Empress from 1936 to 1938. These festivals were one-act play competitions with cash prizes for the winners. The festivals involved three to four troupes of local performers. An article appeared in The Macleod Gazette on March 4, 1937, explained what the festival entailed, and why it had originally been devised:

> This event was promoted last year by Messrs. Hubert Perry and Jack Cutler, under the auspices of the Presbyterian Ladies' Aid, and this year it has the same promoters and sponsors. The object was originally to encourage dramatics in this district by enabling various organizations, particularly in the rural districts, to appear in amateur dramatics without the expense and risk involved in promoting a play by themselves. Unfortunately this year, owing to the condition of the roads, some of the rural organizations have not had a chance to prepare for the event and are therefore not represented. But from the three troupes that are in competition, some real competition is expected. Granum is well known for its local dramatic

> talent, and the Orton M.I. were the winners of last year's festival. The local group will certainly give the visitors keen competition, and a good evening's entertainment is expected for next Wednesday.[224]

It is apparent by this competition that there was an ongoing interest within the community to foster growth in dramatic performance.

By the year 1937, the period of significant live theatrical entertainment at the Empress Theatre was effectively over. Daniel Boyle's purchase of the Empress Theatre represents the beginning of a new era characterized by stability in management and dominated by film.

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# Chapter Four

# The Empress Theatre Today

When the Empress Theatre was built in 1912, it provided the people of Fort Macleod with a permanent, suitable and modern theatre used for both film and live performance of all types. Although film has been shown at the Empress throughout its entire history up to the present day, the period of significant live theatrical activity at the Empress was relatively short-lived. A study of the period from 1912 to 1937 provides the most insight into the wide range of professional activity which took place at the Empress, as well as the eclectic use of the theatre by the community. At the time of Daniel Boyle's purchase of the Empress Theatre in 1937, live theatrical activity had slowed to a near stop at the Empress. Clearly, the renovations undertaken by Boyle in 1938 were aimed at improving the theatre as a modern motion picture house, and thus represented the conclusion of an era of significant live theatrical performance.

Ronald Clay writes that the Empress Theatre enjoyed its most profitable period as a movie theatre during the twenty-six years that Daniel Boyle owned and operated it.[1] After Boyle's death, the theatre was sold five times, with the most recent and significant sale being to the Fort Macleod Provincial Historic Area Society on May 1, 1987.[2]

On January 20, 1982, the Fort Macleod historic district, including the Empress Theatre, was officially established in Fort Macleod.[3] On February 10, 1982, The Macleod Gazette announced that the Empress Theatre was soon to be designated as a provincial historic resource. The same article quoted the justification for the designation from an Alberta Culture report. According to the report, the Empress Theatre is of historical interest especially because of "...the role it played in the life of the community....The tide of prosperity of town and district has been echoed by the fortunes of the Empress; it stands as testimony to southern Alberta's heritage."[4] The Gazette article also noted the architectural significance of the building and spoke optimistically of the possibility that the Empress could become "...the show place of the province's first heritage district."[5]

On March 3, 1982, The Macleod Gazette announced that the Heritage Canada Foundation would soon be "...the latest group to join in the efforts to establish a historic district in Fort Macleod."[6] By August 1982, the Heritage Canada Foundation had opened an office, appointed a co-ordinator and begun work on a Main Street project. On August 18, 1982, The Macleod Gazette disclosed the basic philosophy behind the Main Street project. "It is the intention of the foundation to utilize the experience gained in its demonstration projects to promote the concept of revitalization through preservation."[7] In the same article, Mayor Wes Olmstead stressed the importance of cooperation between the Main Street project coodinator and the people of Fort Macleod in order to "...encourage the preservation of the town's historic structures."[8]

The Empress Theatre was designated as one of the essential historic structures to be preserved in the historic district. On May 1, 1987, the Historic Area Society Board purchased the Empress Theatre from its previous owners. This was the first time that the Society had purchased a historic building in Fort Macleod. In previous situations, the Society had provided funds to support existing owners in their upgrading of historic buildings.[9] The Society's decision to purchase the Empress is particularly significant, as it demonstrated the desire of the community that the Empress maintain a dominant position in the Historical District and become a self-supporting, successful social centre of the community.[10] With the purchase of the theatre came the announcement of the intention of the Society to begin restoration and renovation of the theatre in order to utilize it as a community performing arts centre. Initial plans to restore the exterior of the theatre and make interior renovations would upgrade the performing space as well as make the theatre more accessible to the audience.[11] Community groups, such as the Fort Macleod and District Allied Arts

Council, the Willow Creek Folk Club, the Fort Players, and the Great West Theatre Company, would now have a permanent home base.

In an article appearing in the May 6, 1987 issue of The Macleod Gazette, steering committee chairman, Joyce Widmer, assured the residents of Fort Macleod that the theatre would not be a municipal tax burden because the Society is funded through Alberta Culture. She also expressed the hopes of the Society that the Empress Theatre would become a self-supporting social centre for the entire community. In Widmer's opinion, the restoration of the Empress would benefit the entire community.[12] This opinion was shared by the first manager hired by the board. In a May 13, 1987 article in The Macleod Gazette, manager Bob Gier stated that the community as a whole had a positive attitude toward the theatre. He also expressed his intention to consult with various community groups that had previously used the theatre, as well as with churches, schools, the town, and any other groups that might be interested in using the space.[13]

Restoration and renovation of the Empress Theatre began in 1987 with both exterior and interior repairs. According to Clay, great care was taken to maintain the "...original ambience and character of the theatre...."[14] In brief, on the outside, repairs were made to the brick, the roof, the neon sign and the chimney. The newly restored front of the theatre closely resembles its original form. In the interior, much attention was given to both the floors and ceilings, with new stippling applied to the lobby and lower level, and new linoleum applied in the lobby and on the stairs. In the auditorium, the original hardwood flooring has been reconditioned and new runners of carpet extend the length of the aisles and up the stairs to the balcony. New red velvet curtains are draped over the entrances to the auditorium and frame the proscenium. All of the seats in the house have been re-upholstered in a coordinating fabric.

In order to serve both performers and audiences of today's community, additional renovations have been made to the Empress Theatre. On the main floor, washroom facilities for the disabled have been added. The stage area has been improved with new blacks, new sound and lighting equipment, a retractable movie screen, and a six-foot thrust.[15] In what was deemed "a delicate piece of work,"[16] a new basement area was excavated in order to add approximately 1200 square feet to the building. This new space accommodates public washrooms, an office for theatre management, as well as a large, multi-purpose meeting or rehearsal room. The old portion of the basement has been upgraded to some extent but the historic dressing rooms and stairway have been preserved.[17]

The renovations to the Empress Theatre include many more details and repairs than those outlined here.

According to Ronald Clay, a total of $600,000 has been spent on the renovation and restoration of the Empress.[18] The project was officially completed on June 29, 1989. The grand re-opening for the theatre has been scheduled for June 14 through 16, 1990.

The Empress Theatre in Fort Macleod represents something much greater than a historic building that has been preserved and refurbished. It is not a museum piece reduced to public view because it has outlived its former usefulness; it is rather a vital, dynamic performance space and focal point of the community. The community of Fort Macleod has had a particularly long-standing relationship with the Empress Theatre. For nearly eighty years the Empress Theatre has been the hub of theatrical activity in Fort Macleod. The very fact that the Empress has effectively served the needs of the community has contributed to its longevity and to its recent restoration. The story of the Empress Theatre reveals the much larger history of theatre in Fort Macleod because it provides the focus for most of the theatrical activity in the town. An analysis of a season of entertainment at the Empress during any given year between 1912 and 1937 effectively reveals what types of entertainment the community was enjoying, who was participating in amateur performance, how well it was received, who was sponsoring productions, how frequently they were performed and for what reasons.

An analysis of the early history of the Empress also provides a microcosmic view of the history of theatrical activity on the prairies, as the Empress represents a rather typical theatre in a western town. Of course, this is not to ignore the fact that Fort Macleod was comprised of some unique demographics and economic circumstances which were particularly conducive to the growth of theatrical activity in the town, such as the influence of the N.W.M.P., the community of ranchers of British descent, and the optimistic forecast that Fort Macleod would become the railway hub of southern Alberta. It is rather to emphasize that the Empress Theatre in Fort Macleod was not distinct from other western Canadian theatres in its original conception or use. By making selective comparisons between the Empress Theatre in Fort Macleod and other theatres on the Canadian prairies, it becomes obvious that the pattern of development of the Empress reflects like patterns of other prairie theatres. By their very nature, the circuits of travelling road shows ensured that people all across the West were exposed to many of the same companies. Although many companies played extended runs in the larger centres such as Edmonton or Winnipeg, the one-night stands at the Empress represent the typical offerings at many smaller centres such as Red Deer or Lethbridge. These engagements at the Empress, however brief, still reveal the incredible range of companies touring at the time: from opera to animal acts to serious drama to minstrel shows. In addition to professional companies, the activity of amateur groups at the Empress also provides samples of community activity that was commonly occurring across the Prairies. By using the Empress Theatre as a specific example for study, it is possible to gain a sense of the larger picture of theatrical entertainment on the prairies from 1912 to 1938, including the variety and frequency of live performance, the size and general response of audiences, the involvement of the community in amateur productions, and the challenges facing management through periods of various social and economic change.

There currently remains in Fort Macleod a felt need for a useful performance space that can comfortably accommodate a relatively large audience of three hundred and seventy-one. Never static for any long period of time, the Empress Theatre was always adapted, in both its physical structure and mandate, in order to remain useable. The original theatre structure, complete with renovations undertaken in the 1920's and 1930's, as well as the most recent renovations, still fulfills the dual expectations of the public: that a historic building have its historic beauty preserved while still preserving its original usefulness.

By 1912, when the Empress was built, Fort Macleod was in great need of a suitable theatre, both for live performance and film. Except for the brief period of time when the Empress Theatre was closed over a rental disagreement, the theatrical life of the community almost completely revolved around the Empress. All professional touring companies arriving in Fort Macleod appeared at the Empress, as well as any large-scale sporting events, political rallies, and musical concerts. Amateur performance also revolved around the Empress Theatre, as newspapers reveal that the majority of local concerts, recitals, amateur plays, festivals, and benefits in any given year were performed on the Empress stage. It is clear that the entertainment industry not only extensively utilized the Empress Theatre, but depended heavily upon it for the industry's continued existence.

Although the theatre was privately owned, it is obvious from the amount of community activity at the Empress that the community itself felt a sense of ownership of the theatre. A community-sponsored event often filled the house to capacity, which meant that (in the original auditorium) up to five hundred people from the community could gather as a unit in support of a particular cause, or to enjoy the performance of other talented members of the community. Although the community was active socially through various activities (many of which were not held at the Empress) the Empress Theatre provided the people of Fort Macleod with one of the only permanent social gathering places in the town. This sense of permanence helped to establish the Empress as an institution strongly supporting social and cultural activity within the town. Although not explicitly documented, it is apparent that the Empress Theatre management was supportive of community use of the theatre throughout the period from 1912 to 1938. The recent purchase of the theatre by the Fort Macleod Historic Area Society Board indicates that the Empress Theatre still remains at the focus of much community activity today.

From 1912 to 1938 the Empress Theatre demonstrated an ability to survive various degrees of change in the climate of the times. It proved itself adaptable to varieties of performance, changing demands of the theatre patrons, innovations in the industry, and economic circumstances. Within the first year after its opening, the first modifications to the Empress were undertaken in order to better accommodate large touring companies. Other physical changes over the years were implemented in order to make way for advancements in the motion picture industry or to improve the interior of the theatre for audience comfort. It is clear that all managers of the Empress during this period were concerned about keeping the Empress up-to-date and maintaining the image of being one of the top theatres in southern Alberta.

The priority of early management to maintain and modify the Empress has contributed to the longevity of the Empress Theatre and to the historical interest of the building today. After Daniel Boyle's renovations in 1938, the Empress has remained virtually unchanged; and this fact has created favorable conditions for the preservation of much of the original theatre. Much of the charm surrounding the Empress Theatre is associated with the unique features such as the neon tulip lights and pressed metal ceiling, the staggered double seats, the balcony, the glass ticket booth and the hardwood floors. Even more fascinating are the signatures of performers from the touring era gracing the board walls of the tiny basement dressing rooms. In size and structure the Empress was very much like other combination movie/opera houses across the Prairies. What makes the Empress Theatre unique today is the sad fact that most other prairie theatres no longer exist. In addition, the Empress Theatre is not only well preserved, but it continues to serve the community in a manner very similar to how it served the community from 1912 to 1938. In many respects, the entire essence of the Empress Theatre has been rejuvenated so that the original function of the theatre is as new in appearance as the original hardwood floors, which upon restoration are as shiny and golden as they were on the day of installation.

In recent years, the Empress Theatre has once again enjoyed capacity houses for the summer theatre productions staged by the Great West Theatre Company. Line-ups for ticket purchases extend the length of the block and the main street of Fort Macleod is busy with activity during the warm summer evenings. During the 1989 season, it is estimated that the Empress Theatre served over 12,000 people.[19] This diverse group of people was comprised not only of tourists passing through the historic town, and families enjoying an evening drive from Lethbridge or the surrounding area, but local residents of Fort Macleod spending an evening at the theatre that has been a part of their town for nearly eighty years. The Empress Theatre continues to exist today because the community of Fort Macleod still deems the theatre a useful and important institution established firmly in the cultural fabric of Fort Macleod. The Empress Theatre is important today because the community believes it is important -- whether for the activities of the Fort Players or the Willow Creek Folk Club.

Driving through Fort Macleod today on the major route of Highway Number Three, travellers bypass the main street of the little town. On the bypass route, however, stands the wooden Fort Museum, a standing tribute to the original settlers of Fort Macleod. If travellers decide to stop and park in the lot accommodating the Fort Museum, they might notice a large sign advertising the Empress Theatre on the alley side of a brick building. Venturing beyond the Fort to the main street, they have the opportunity to see the brick structure of the Empress Theatre from the street, or even take in an evening performance inside its newly restored interior. It is here that a vision of Fort Macleod may be observed from an alternate perspective. It is a vision that offers an insight into a period of history when the Empress Theatre existed as the social entertainment centre of the entire community. For as much as the Fort is a physical reminder of the origin of Fort Macleod as the most western post of civic authority in Canada, the Empress Theatre represents the needs and desires of the community to build and maintain a formal and permanent establishment of theatre and entertainment in Fort Macleod.

# Notes

[1] Clay 9.

[2] Clay 10.

[3] Macleod Gazette, Jan. 20, 1982, 9.

[4] Macleod Gazette, Feb. 10, 1982, 1.

[5] Macleod Gazette, Feb. 10, 1982, 14.

[6] Macleod Gazette, Mar. 3, 1982, 1.

[7] Macleod Gazette, Aug. 18, 1982, 1.

[8] Macleod Gazette, Aug. 18, 1982, 1.

[9] Macleod Gazette, May 6, 1987, 1.

[10] Macleod Gazette, Mar. 11, 1987, 1.

[11] Macleod Gazette, Mar. 11, 1987, 1.

[12] Macleod Gazette, May 6, 1987, 1.

[13] Macleod Gazette, May 13, 1987, 1.

[14] Clay 13.

[15] Clay 11-13.

[16] Macleod Gazette, Apr. 16, 1988, 1.

[17] Macleod Gazette, Apr. 16, 1988, 1.

[18] Clay 13.

[19] Macleod Gazette, Aug. 30, 1989, 1.

# Bibliography

Bibliographical Note: The majority of sources cited for this study are Fort Macleod newspapers. Due to the age and condition of the papers when microfilmed, there are numerous examples where letters, words, or punctuation are almost illegible. In these cases I have attempted to discern the material to the best of my ability and have taken the liberty of replacing punctuation marks that are obviously missing from the text. In all cases I have attempted to be as faithful to the original as possible.

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